

THREE SISTERS: TELLING COURAGE

My Dear Sisters of Michoacán:

Your words and courage have stayed with me for three months. I cannot forget you nor do I want to. I was in your company for only 20 or 30 minutes but your troubling story pulls my conscience like a voice calling in the night.

So I am gathering my thoughts and impressions of that day in Nogales, Mexico at Grupos Beta. I will be as accurate as memory allows. Forgive me if I stray from the facts or forget an important truth. I offer the following account with love and respect and with the hope that others might learn from you as we did.

My wife, Deborah and I were at Grupos Beta (GB) as members of a Borderlinks Delegation. Borderlinks is a non-profit organization with headquarters in Tucson, Arizona. Its mission is to educate others about the complex issues pertaining to immigration and to inspire delegates, like Deborah and myself, to act on what they learn. For almost a week our delegation traveled in Mexico and Arizona learning first hand about "Immigration and Criminal Justice".

On the first two days of the seminar, we walked an immigrant trail in the hot Arizona desert, spent a night in Nogales with an unemployed maquiladora (multi-national owned factory) worker and her daughter, met with the police from Nogales, AZ and visited a shelter for young deportees, children who had been separated from their families in the chaos of an attempted border crossing or in an often-heartless deportation process.

When we arrived at Grupos Beta there were a lot of recently "re-patriated" (deported) men outside, milling around, chatting, waiting, and making phone calls. Funded by the Mexican government, Grupos Beta offers migrants who are heading north information concerning the dangers of the desert as well as their legal rights once they cross over into US territory. This agency also offers basic services to migrants who have been repatriated to Mexico. Another part of its mission is to assist in searches for missing migrants and look for the bodies of those who have died from dehydration, disease or murder.

The twelve members of our delegation had come to hear a presentation by a GB staff member. We sat in a public room where deportees make phone calls, use the bathroom or recover enough to figure out their next move. Many arrive exhausted and despondent. We sat down in no particular arrangement as our host greeted us and began to explain the work of GB. Sitting on a bench near us were four Latina women who had just arrived after a failed attempt to cross the border. They were in a state of shock. One got up to make a phone call. The other three were sisters from the State of Michoacán. Michoacán is very poor and much in the news recently due to the rampant violence of the drug wars there. Only a few weeks ago, assassins of drug-lords killed 20 policemen. It is a dangerous place to live.

Our host welcomed us and began to inform us about his work. Our attention, however, gradually shifted from his presentation to the three disconsolate sisters on the bench. They appeared to range in age from late 20s to late 30s. As they collected themselves, they too were listening to the presenter. It seemed to me that he was tired. He was less than sensitive towards the people he was attempting to serve. Perhaps the suffering he witnessed on a daily basis caused him too much pain. Like a father who is angry with a child who does something rash and gets hurt, he expressed frustration at the women's getting into trouble. At one point, the oldest sister respectfully took issue with something he said.

I did not learn the names of the sisters, so I have taken the liberty of giving them names: the oldest is Mercy, the middle Lupe, and the youngest Carmen. As they began to relate their story, members of our Borderlinks delegation leaned towards them in rapt attention. The director also pulled back and listened. Something unplanned was unfolding in front of us that upstaged the planned event and transformed us from observers to participants.

Mercy began to tell her story, her truth. She had thought it would be simple to cross back over the border from Mexico into the United States, as easy as it had been the first time seven years ago. But for Mercy and her two sisters who attempted to cross together a week ago, the return had been terrifying and disastrous. As she recalled the trauma of recent events tears streamed down her cheeks. She seemed oblivious to them and kept on talking, encouraged by our sympathetic listening.

Several weeks before, Mercy and Lupe had received the heartbreaking news that their father, whom they had not seen in years, had died in Hidalgo, Mexico. They left their jobs and homes in Los Angeles to bury him.

Originally, Mercy had fled her Michoacán home and crossed the border into California for work and for sanctuary from an abusive husband. Before she left Michoacán seven years ago her husband abducted their son and she could not find him. She had never stopped loving him even as she valiantly made a new home in California. The heartbreak of her story is not unusual. In fact, her sister, Lupe, had also crossed over at the same time for similar reasons. Mercy and Lupe had been sending money home for years to assist their family.

Mercy also wrote letters to her son but never heard back from him. When she went to Hidalgo for her father's burial she hoped to reunite with her son. Not knowing how her former husband may have poisoned his mind, she was afraid that he would reject her. It had been so long since they had seen each other and he would be a young man now. Would he even recognize her?

When the two sisters completed their rites of bereavement and honoring their father, their younger sister, Carmen, decided to join them in their trek back into the States this time. She too was having problems at home.

Now the three sisters sat near us on a very hot afternoon in Nogales, Mexico. We had come to find out about life on the Border at Grupos Beta and were learning first hand. As we listened to Mercy's story pouring out from her, I was touched by her trust, honesty and valor in sharing such vulnerable information with people she did not know. We delegates had all crossed a precious bridge and were transfixed on the other side by the suffering and courage of these three sisters from Michoacán.

By this time, we had created a circle, that most empathic of shapes. a Tess, an American writer living in Mexico City, sat next to Mercy and quietly consoled her. Deborah had moved into the empty space on the bench at the other end bringing Kleenex and compassion with her for the tears that were flowing copiously.

At the burial in Hidalgo, Mercy's son had initially been chilly towards her, but later a fragile rapprochement in this mother-son relationship seemed possible. Mercy was torn about returning to Los Angeles, but her life was there. So she, Lupe and Carmen set out to cross the border. Unlike the first journey seven years earlier, however, crossing now was fraught with danger. In fact, hundreds die every year trying to cross.

Some of the reasons for this tragic loss of life include a formidable wall, the intensification of border security, the Minute Men, and the tightening of the margins of the border so that only the most treacherous desert and high mountains are now available for crossing. Dehydration and hypothermia are the most common killers. Young children are dying in the desert as well as adults.

These three sisters had no idea how difficult their journey would become. In addition to natural hazards, women crossing the border are frequently the victims of sexual predators and thieves. Robbers or drug addicts on either side of the border sometimes force women to strip and then submit them to violative searches for money. It was possible this happened to Mercy, Lupe and Carmen. After crossing the border, they wandered for six days in the Arizona desert where extremes of heat and cold, as well as cactus and snakes are present

dangers. Their water ran out and they became dehydrated, cutting cactus open to moisten their parched mouths. Then the Border Patrol caught them. Exhausted and depleted in every way, they relate now how BP was rough with them and shoved them into a van. They then spent a night in a detention center and were delivered to the Mexican side of the border by a bus line outsourced by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Mercy and Lupe were shattered by exhaustion, humiliation and loss. Their homes were in Los Angeles where they had work and a community of relationships. Their options now were abysmal. If they were caught again attempting to cross the border criminal charges would be filed against them and they would face a long and uncertain period of detention or imprisonment in any one of 180 detention centers scattered across the United States. It is sometimes the practice of ICE to separate families and place detainees hundreds or thousands of miles from where they have been apprehended.

It was not clear to me what Mercy and her two sisters would do. Carmen had lost the least since this was her first crossing and she had not established a life yet on US soil. But for Mercy and Lupe, an act of love for their father had turned into an unbelievable nightmare. Mercy got up and anxiously tried to reach her son by cell phone. There is some hope that she will be able to rebuild a relationship with him.

Members of our delegation moved in yet closer to the three sisters. The presenter and we had learned much from them. We offered them eyes of comfort and words of support. When our time was up, there were embraces and tears. We had listened with care, and had honored them. They were grateful for our empathy. They smiled warmly and thanked us.

It was difficult to leave them. I wanted to help them, but there was no more to do. As we said goodbye, I sought words of encouragement,

“Ustedes son fuertes. No llegaron a este tiempo duro en sus vidas sin una fe poderosa. Que Dios bendigan siguiendo en esa fe y fuerza con mucha esperanza.”

“You are strong. You did not come this far without having a powerful faith. May God bless you as you continue in that strength and faith with much hope.”

So Dear Michoacán sisters, I do not know where you are now. I pray that you have found some healing and hope. I know the other members of our delegation join me in this well-wishing. You gave us an incredible gift. You opened our hearts. This letter is my thank-you.

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