

"Acompañamiento"

The Privilege of Walking Alongside

By Elena Huegel MA '07

Will you let me be your servant,

Let me be as Christ to you;

Pray that I may have the grace to

Let you be my servant, too.

("Servant song" by Richard Gillard)

I thought I was late. A hint of wind cooled my face on this hot, muggy day as I jogged up the grassy hill behind the Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) campus to the Discipleship Center. Since the hill is a long one, I had time to remember how what happened last week was sending me up the hill today. During the first session of the Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI), I enjoyed getting to know Aimy, a student from Vietnam. She explained to me that the war called the "Vietnam War" in the United States is known as the "American War" in Vietnam. She shared with me both happy and heart wrenching stories of growing up in a country that withered with violence like the napalm that disintegrated the trees. On the last day of the session, as we were saying good-bye to head out the door for the weekend, Aimy let fall her own emotional bomb. She spoke softly, as if tearing the words out of her soul, "my mother died last night." Then she fell into my arms, weeping. I held her as the whole class gathered around, first shocked, and then tried to find appropriate words to comfort her.

Aimy is Buddhist, but she attended a Catholic school in Vietnam. Teresa, a Maryknoll sister who lives in East Timor, offered to ask Father Jacques, a Jesuit priest from one of the French speaking African countries, to say a mass for her mother. Aimy thought about it and then decided that she would like to have a service at 7 pm on Friday the 14th of May, at the same time her family would be celebrating a Buddhist ceremony in Vietnam, eleven time zones away. The SPI community was invited to attend.

I am on my way to a Catholic Mass organized by a Maryknoll sister, officiated by a Jesuit priest, at a Protestant school, for the mother of a Buddhist woman I just met, in a community of people from many different races, cultures, and faith traditions, and Aimy has asked me to stand in for her family.

*We are pilgrims on a journey,
We are travelers on the road;
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.*
("Servant song" by Richard Gillard)

When I arrive at the top of the hill, I am out of breath. Father Jacques is standing outside speaking to Aimy. He is dressed in olive green pants and shirt and she in crisp, but airy, white. I greet them and then go inside the hall where I meet the other people who have already arrived. They are all women: American, Indonesian, and African. Together we prepare refreshments and finish arranging the details for the service. The pentagonal-shaped room has chairs set up in semicircular rows facing a makeshift altar, and the large windows allow for a broad view of the green grass and trees, the city of Harrisonburg, and the Shenandoah Mountains in the background. The windows also let in the sunlight, brightening the floor and heating the western side of the room. There are cloths from different parts of the world decorating the tables and the altar, which is made up of two tables, one larger and one smaller, like a stair step. On the lower part of the altar there is a Buddhist "singing bowl", another bowl full of sand, and a round, hollow wooden artifact that I would later find out is an instrument played at Buddhist funerals. On the upper surface of the altar is a wooden chalice and plate with wafers set on a square piece of white cloth, a small glass of water, a Bible, a book of Catholic rituals, and a large white candle. On the floor in front of the altar sits a vase full of multicolored carnations.

After helping the women, I go back outside. I hear Father Jacques comforting Aimy, “Culture sometimes gets in the way of what we would really like to do.” Aimy nods in reply.

As people begin to come into the room, Doreen from Kenya and Yanti from Indonesia ask me to sit with them in the front row. Aimy lights three incense sticks, and as the spicy-sweet smell wafts through the room, she sticks them into the sand-bowl. She turns and sits down next to me. Father Jacques lights the white candle and the mass begins.

During the homily, Aimy reaches for my hand and holds on tight. I squeeze back, willing comfort to flow from my fingers to hers. After the songs and prayers, Father Jacques consecrates the elements for the Eucharist. His hands shake, and I wonder if he is nervous about inviting non-Catholics to share in the elements. People stand with their hands clasped either in front or behind their bodies, and many bow their heads; several weep openly. When it comes time to partake of the communion elements, people whom I know not to be Catholics including Mennonites, Presbyterians, and Syrian Orthodox go forward to receive communion. Aimy does not share in communion even though she has recited the prayers and sung the songs which she knows by heart. Her eyes fill and hands tremble, but the tears never spill out onto her cheeks. I silently pray that this mass might be remembered by her as a moment of healing not only in her grief for her mother but also from the traumas of her childhood.

Father Daniel, a Syrian Orthodox priest dressed in his clerical clothing, stands in the back of the room. During the Monday class earlier in the week, he expressed his shock and disapproval because he witnessed women helping to serve communion in the local Catholic Church in Harrisonburg. Perhaps because my brother's name is Daniel, I made a special effort during the session to get to know Father Daniel and help him feel comfortable and safe. Father Daniel asked me after class one day if he could accompany me as I went for a jog in the neighborhood around the University. He confessed that it was the first time in his life he had ever been alone with a woman in public.

As Father Jacques pronounces the benediction and the last of the three incense sticks burns out, Father Daniel spontaneously begins to sing, his beautiful bass chanting a moving postlude, the final note to a one-of-a-kind service. After this mass, where Sister Teresa served the chalice, Father Daniel seems to be at ease and supportive even though he did not share the Eucharist with us. What changed him? Could it be that our afternoon run, where we talked about his fears of the possible eruption of violence in his homeland, his commitment to serving the church no matter how high the cost, and his love for his family, created a safe space that allowed him to momentarily let down his guard and offer his musical tribute in spite of his theological or religious restrictions? Even though I never asked Father Daniel these questions, his participation throughout the rest of SPI was more relaxed and informal. He even started wearing non-clerical clothing during the classes.

The service has ended, but the community care for Aimy has not. Refreshments are served by both women and men from different countries: tea, juice, nuts, dried fruit, and cookies. Aimy hands me her camera, and I take pictures of her with different people from the SPI community. The women are the last to leave, putting away the chairs, picking up the altar and decorations, and clearing the refreshments. Eventually, I walk back to my room with the taste of dried apricots and artichoke tea lingering in my mouth.

*I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
Speak the peace you long to hear.*
("Servant song" by Richard Gillard)

This experience at SPI has been seminal in my trauma healing and conflict transformation work. As I look back on the years since my time at SPI, I realize that this is what I do: I walk alongside strangers, companions on the path of life, who, either in

short stints or long hikes, become friends. In Spanish, we have a word for this mutual accompaniment along the way. When we speak of “acompañamiento,” there is a strong physical and spiritual sensation of being fully oneself while being completely present for another person. I asked my friend, Carolina Fernández, who is a community development worker in Paraguay and a companion on the path of mutual presence, how she would define “acompañamiento.” She said, “To walk alongside is not only an emotional or intellectual exercise. ‘Acompañamiento’ is the experience of being formed and transformed by choosing the companionship of another as if dancing together, within the circle of a community, to then take the beauty and grace of that dance to all the other spaces and times where we are called to be present.” “Acompañamiento” is the way we let others know they do not walk alone, to offer the other dignity and hope and, from our own vulnerability, receive the same. “Acompañamiento” creates and upholds a mutual and reciprocal balance of relational debt; I might help you carry your backpack for a distance while you might offer me a much needed drink of water.

While we walk in “acompañamiento,” we have to balance our empathy with our differentiation and self awareness. In empathy, we are invited to put on someone else’s shoes and feel what they feel as they walk along the path. However, I recognize that if I take your shoes and walk in them for too long, you might end up getting hurt from walking barefoot and your shoes are likely to cause my feet to develop blisters! To accompany each other, we need to balance the “putting oneself in the place of the other” with “putting oneself in one’s own place,” too.

“Acompañamiento” means we will have many “reencuentros.” This concept could be translated as “reencounter” or “coming back together again” but these English words don’t carry the rich connotation of returning to the presence after a long absence, of walking forward in a spiral that leads back to memories, places, experiences and people, but from a different point of view, or of gathering pieces of the old and weaving them into new relationships. As we walk forward together, facing life’s challenges, the wisdom and truth of our “reencuentros” sustain and guide us. I am meeting myself in you just as you are returning to your authentic self by walking with me. Taking the risk of walking

together with honesty and solidarity makes us more resilient as we walk in the spiral toward the traumas and conflicts we face later in our lives.

*I will weep when you are weeping;
When you laugh I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow
'Til we've seen this journey through.*
("Servant song" by Richard Gillard)

I avoided the trauma healing courses in the master's program at SPI as long as I could. My advisor, Vernon Jantzi kept insisting that it was important that I understand the traumas behind some of the interpersonal and systemic conflicts I was facing in Chile. Hence, one of the last classes I took at SPI was "Trauma Awareness and Transformation" and, during that class, I realized that many of the people whom I accompanied in Chile had suffered trauma stemming from the years of dictatorship. After that class, I began to explore the possibility of offering a trauma healing workshop for the pastors and leaders of the Pentecostal Church of Chile but met with solid resistance to any discussion within the church that might be interpreted as politically motivated. Finally, in January 2010, we were able to organize the first trauma healing course with thirteen participants at the Shalom Center, a mountain peacebuilding retreat center in the foothills of the Andes. Three weeks later, when a catastrophic earthquake and subsequent tsunamis struck Chile, the Pentecostal Church of Chile had thirteen leaders trained in trauma healing ready to work in the five regions most severely affected by the disaster. In the years after the earthquake and tsunamis, we were accompanied every step along the way to recovery by the Rev. Dr. Beverly Prestwood-Taylor from the Brookfield Institute in Massachusetts. The trauma healing team at the Shalom Center of the Pentecostal Church of Chile carefully systematized the experiences of accompanying individuals, communities and congregations throughout Chile, while incorporating the principles from STAR, Youth

STAR and the "Trauma Awareness and Transformation course I took at SPI, and created a program called "Retoños en las ruinas: esperanza en el trauma" (Re-growth in the ruins: hope in trauma) which includes the following courses:

- "Retoños en las ruinas: esperanza en el trauma", level 1 basic introductory course.
- Conflict Transformation: Hope for Traumatized Communities and Congregations
- Four Winds of Healing: Hope for Communities and Congregations
- Odyssey of Healing: Hope for Individuals
- Facilitator training for "Retoños en las ruinas: esperanza en el trauma"

*When we sing to God in heaven
We shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony.*
("Servant song" by Richard Gillard)

Some time ago, I was reading through my journals from the weeks spent at SPI, and I came across a series of entries from the "Qualitative Research for Social Change" course I took in the summer of 2004. At the time, I thought I should share the impact of this funeral service on my peacebuilding efforts with the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP), but the idea has lain dormant until now. The background notes for this story are from the ethnographic observations in that original class journal and later entries in my personal journals. My thanks to Mark Chupp and the CJP community for the shared wisdom that continues to guide me in my walk today.

After a "Retoños en las ruinas: esperanza en el trauma" course last year, one of the participants, whom I knew to be a social research professor at a university in Mexico, informed me that she would be retiring next year and would like to conduct an in-depth inquiry into the personal and community healing as a result of the program. A couple of months later, after another course in a different city, a second participant, an

educational research professor, also told me she would be retiring next year and would like to be a part of the research team. We will be meeting in July 2018, along with experienced facilitators from different Spanish-speaking countries, to design an evaluation and systematization project. New pre-course and post-course surveys are already being used to collect data.

The program continues to grow as new principles and tools are added, and the facilitators contextualize the program to the specific needs in the places where they are offering the courses. I travel to the different countries, at the request of the participants, to co-design the facilitation courses where we update each other on new discoveries either in trauma and conflict transformation literature, the practical applications of new theories, and the changes that they have made while teaching the courses in their particular contexts. The program does not have a permanent budget and the administration, organization, course design, production of manuals, and facilitation is carried out by volunteers. "Retoños en las ruinas" is the practical, hope-filled, systematized expression of individuals and communities committed to "acompañamiento." For me, personally, the program is an extension of the opportunity I had to be present with the multicultural community at SPI. .

The funeral for Aimy's mother has become a beacon which sheds light on my path. This experience taught me that the practice of "acompañamiento," which deepens understanding, dignity and hope, even in the midst of profound cultural and religious differences, transforms my life as well as the lives of individuals and entire communities. A basic tenet of the "Retoños en las ruinas: esperanza en el trauma" program is that each facilitator and participant will be invited into a liminal space of "acompañamiento" where significant relationships guide us to "reencuentros," and we reconnect in wholesome ways to God, ourselves, others and the natural world. The truths I learned from the privilege of walking alongside Aimy are confirmed over and over again by the "Retoños en las ruinas: esperanza en el trauma" participants in Chile, Mexico, Paraguay, Argentina, Nicaragua and Puerto Rico, who share their storytelling,

justice-seeking, dignity-affirming gifts while traveling together through trauma and conflict into relationships that are transforming our lives, families, communities and congregations.