

GUATEMALA 2009, REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY
AUGUST 16, 2009
Matthew 25:31-46

Marsha Gulick

Where to begin? Where to begin? It is really difficult to know where to start to attempt to capture this incredible journey for you. But I will begin where we started months ago when we began to prepare for this journey that we intended as a pilgrimage. Many of you might not have thought of a pilgrimage since the time that you studied Chaucer's rollicking story of a journey to Canterbury undertaken by a band of unlikely pilgrims. Well, we went on such a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey, with the intention of opening ourselves up to whatever came to us. As pilgrims we were invited to cultivate a "pilgrim" attitude in which we learned to be present, to listen and to notice, all of which required us to slow down. Each evening we met for a time of vespers where we heard holy words, sang, and joined in a time of sharing. But this sharing was geared to our pilgrim journey. First we shared what we had noticed during the day: what had caught our attention? What had stirred our emotions? What had annoyed us or given us joy? Then we paused for a time of reflection: What was it about these incidents that made us notice them? Why had they called to us? How did we feel about what we had encountered? We always concluded our time together with prayer. But there is one more aspect of the pilgrim journey: transformation. How is this noticing and reflecting causing changes in our lives? How will we live differently from having had this experience? This aspect of the pilgrimage takes time, perhaps even a lifetime....

I'd like to illustrate with a personal account of something that "called to me" during our journey to Guatemala: all of you who have journeyed to developing nations have experienced the relentless pestering of street vendors who want you to buy their wares. Guatemala is an incredibly impoverished country and economic and political interests that have acted in our name have intensified the poverty there. And so I wanted to help people and be kind, but after a while the incessant requests for you to buy begin to wear you down. I tried to develop strategies for saying no politely, but without encouragement, but this did little to deter folks. I began to be proactive: I would smile and say "Buenas dias" or "Buenas tardes" before a vendor got the chance to ask me to buy. I realized I wanted to be considered as a person, so if I stopped to interact with someone with whom I was thinking of buying something, I would tell them about the person I was buying the gift for. "I want something for my granddaughters, I have two, they are 4 and 2 years old, Oh, yes, I love them very much." I'm looking for something for my daughter-in-law. Don't you think that they are difficult to buy for? Yes? It's important for them to have their own lives with their husband and for the mother-in-law not to interfere too much. I see you understand. It's the same here." This strategy made me feel better, but then we went to Chichicastenango, a world-renowned Mayan market that I really have no way to describe. It is filled with mostly native people and goes on and on and on.....It is beautiful. The textiles, the vegetables, the animals...it is amazing! We visited two Mayan sacred sites that are also located in this city. Well, at the end of our excursion, when we were all gathering for the return walk to our bus, a little boy, maybe 7 or 8 years old approached me. Stopping for a minute to wait for friends is a dangerous business, because then the vendors descend. Well, my response to this little boy's repeated requests was, "No." But he was insistent. So being who I am, I began to sing, "No, no, no, no, no." and he responded, "Si, si, si, si, si." "No, no, no, no, no...si, si, si, si, si." This went on for a while and I glanced down at a wizened campesino in a straw cowboy hat who was sitting on the curb close to us, and saw this crinkly smile spread across his face. I really wanted to reach down and hug this child. I waved goodbye and our group of twenty walked several blocks back to our small bus. Well, when I flopped down in the seat next to Caroline, and turned to the entrance to the bus, who was there but our little "si, si, si" entrepreneur. I cracked up. . .went over to him and sang "no,

no, no, no, no” while I gave him a few Quetzals. And, of course, he was rewarded for his persistence by others of us on the bus who purchased his little dolls and other trinkets. It was one of those “priceless” moments.

But my story doesn’t end here with a smile and “good feelings.” These were the facts, the incidents that I noticed. But I couldn’t shake them and started to reflect on my discomfort with the whole buying/selling encounters I had on my pilgrimage in Guatemala. On the evaluation form that we filled out, I remember questioning whether the market in Chichi should even be included in future pilgrimages.

The night we flew into Portland, I spent the night at my son and daughter-in-law’s house and drove to Corvallis the next day. The time in the car alone was a wonderful time for reflection. I began thinking again about the “vender system” in Guatemala. I found myself getting angry and I realized that what I had not liked about the selling encounters in Guatemala, was that I felt I was only valued for the money that I could spend. My personhood was gone. I began to compose in Spanish and decided that once I got home, I would write down my protest into my journal in Spanish. “Yo soy mas que algo que compra.” “I am more than something that buys.” But then, after more reflection I realized something else. We had come home to hear the announcement of a new economic idea in the U.S. ; it was called “Cash for Clunkers.” And somehow, things began to clear in my brain. Here, in the United States, what did all the subtleties of Madison Avenue try to convince me of? I was valuable because of what I could purchase. I could be younger, more popular, happier if only I would buy. My value to my country was because I was a consumer. It was really no different. It was just that I was used to my culture’s attacks on my humanity and the forms it took. I was not used to Guatemala’s.

So, I will continue to say to myself, “I am more than something that buys” and so is everyone else: you and all the venders who approach people asking them to buy throughout the world.

This is how the pilgrim experience works: you stop, you look, you listen, and you take note. You reflect and then wait for transformation. You gain new insights, you grow, and you continue your pilgrim journey.

Jan Thornton
Guatemala 2009

The trip to Guatemala was amazing It was all that I had envisioned and more. Although, I do have to admit that there were a **few small unplanned events** along the way.

So. . .somebody, and I am not mentioning any names, had their passport and debit card stolen after only being in Guatemala for 4 hours. . .oh well, things happen! So. . .someone, and I am not mentioning any names but she looked a lot like Mari, found in her soup not only 2 baby crabs but an entire carnage of fish including the head, eyes, and tail. Ewww! Oh well, things happen! So. . . someone, and I am not mentioning any names but she looked a lot like Molly, fell into a sewer drain. Ewww! Oh well, things happen! These were only brief inconveniences. The trip was truly incredible!

Let me step back a bit to when the trip began for me personally. My learning experience began far before we boarded the airplane in Portland. In preparing for the pilgrimage, Charles did an excellent job of educating us on the history of the Guatemalan people. He recommended we read the book entitled, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. It was the autobiography of a Guatemalan woman who

detailed her life through the Guatemalan Civil War against Spain. For me, reading this book was absolutely eye opening. As I traveled through Guatemala, the words of the book repeatedly kept coming to mind. The author, Rigoberta Menchu, described how the Mayan people were originally a very peaceful people. They lived simple lives in communities where everyone participated in raising the children, everyone shared, everyone contributed. They were a happy people.

When the Spanish came they took their land, killed many of them, tried to break up communities so there was less resistance, and did their best to eradicate their culture. Sounds familiar? Like maybe the White Man trying to eradicate the Native Americans here in the U.S.? But this wasn't 200 years ago, this was during our lifetime.

The Guatemalan people learned to fight, and they battled for 36 years of civil war against Spain to save their country. This war was from 1960 until it ended in 1996. It ended just 13 years ago. In our family, Sarah was 8 years old and Tim was 3; we were in the middle of living our happy, privileged lives. I vaguely remember some of the news clips on TV about the guerilla warfare in Guatemala. It seemed so far away.

Through the book, I learned what life for many of the Guatemalan people had been like before, during and after the civil war. The book gave me an understanding of how the Mayans have been beaten down by the Spanish and why some don't like some of us foreigners. I began to understand why it was important that we go there **not to teach them our ways and our religion, but that we go there to work WITH them in building the school that they so desire for the betterment of their children.**

I went to Guatemala knowing that the people had lived through some of the horrors we in North America have only read in history books. With each of the older Guatemalans that I encountered, I found myself wondering what that person had endured to have survived those terrible 36 years. When you step back to look at the faces of the people, you find there are very few men that would have been of the age to fight during that time. But in their young faces you see a people who are working in their own way to rebuild their country and their lives.

One of the heart-rendering recollections in the book was the author's description of her tenth birthday celebration when she officially was considered an adult. "My parents called me to them and explained what an adult's life is like. They told me I would have many ambitions but I wouldn't have the opportunity to realize them. They said my life wouldn't change, it would go on the same – work, poverty, suffering."

I was reminded of this very passage when Sandy told us of the experience she had while helping the Guatemalan women prepare lunch for us at the work site in La Loma. Sandy formed a special bond with the 3 women throughout the week. One of the women's names was Del Nada. She is 19 and unmarried. She was educated only to the 2nd grade. On our final day in La Loma, Sandy asked her what her plans were for the future, what were her hopes and dreams. She just went blank, like no one had ever asked her that question before. She looked around in uncertainty. She had no answer.

The food these women served us was simple and delicious. Soup was made with potatoes, carrots, acorn squash, black beans, rice, broth and a meat. Nothing processed. Grown in their fields. I tried to imitate their recipe a couple days after we got back to Corvallis. The flavor just did not compare. My squash and carrots tasted bland compared to the Guatemalan vegetables.

In La Loma, we were able to see a small slice of what it is like to live on the top of a mountain in a remote Guatemalan village. We witnessed the warmth, the hospitality, and the smiles of the

villagers. We learned much from them, such as simplicity, happiness. We learned bits about their culture.

As we traveled, we saw corn fields everywhere. Oddly enough, we saw single corn stalks in the strangest places. For example, a single corn stalk growing the middle of a broccoli field. A corn stalk standing proudly in a front yard. A single corn stalk growing wildly in a ditch.

To the Mayans, corn is sacred. It is the center of life. Their traditional believe is that the Guatemalan people are made of corn and their ultimate supreme god is that of the Corn God. Because of this, they never cut down a live corn stalk. Even if a volunteer corn stalk grows up in what we consider to be an odd place. The corn stalk is left to grow tall and strong as a symbol of its importance.

For the last 3 days of our trip, we transformed from pilgrims into tourists. We traveled from Antigua to Panajachel where we stayed in a church resort facility.

–We traveled by boat to San Lucas Toliman to tour a women’s center, a coffee processing facility, and a Catholic Church and mission where we met a priest, Father Shaeffer, who helped the Mayan people during the Civil War by hiding many from the Spaniards, putting his own life at risk.

–We traveled to Chichicastenango to see the what has been called the most colorful native market in Central America, and to hike up to one of the shrines.

–We traveled by boat to Santiago where a devastating mudslide took hundreds of lives when it covered up an entire village in 2005.

During those last three days when we were no longer workers, it was interesting to see how the Mayan people reacted differently toward those they perceived as pilgrims who came to help them build versus those they perceived as Americans who were only there to gain a personal vacation experience.

My favorite parts of the trip? Not in any particular order:

The beautiful Mayan people.

The Volcanos.

Working together for a single cause.

The corn.

My fellow pilgrims.

The shopping.

Learning about the Mayan culture.

The delicious food.

The boat trips on beautiful Lake Atitlan.

Being in the presence of a true saint, Father Schaeffer

The feeling of fulfillment at the end of each work day.

And sharing the entire experience with our son, Tim.

Thank you, Charles, for giving us this extraordinary experience. Thank you to the church for your immense support.

I do hope if any of you have the opportunity to go on a pilgrimage to a less fortunate country that you will seize the opportunity. Your life will be changed in the process.

Carl Lucker

My experience, and probably many other people's, revolve around something I overheard the first day at the work site. Nathan and George were take a break at the top of the hill. I just so happened to be walking by when Nathan said to George, "and I thought they weren't gonna let us do real work."

This quote pretty much summed up the entire five days of work. Yes, they did let us do real work.

The bus ride through the village was fun, and at points, downright scary. As we passed people working and playing outside, they all smiled and waved at us like friends would do, even though none of us had ever seen any of them before.

There were also times on the ride where I didn't think we were going to make it: going around a turn and realizing the bus is tipping over a cliff. But, we made it, every time.

Our bus stopped not in front of the site, but where the road ended. We had to walk up and down a hill to get to the site.

The first day at the work site was one of my favorites, for many reasons. As soon as we got there, they welcomed us with fireworks.

Now these fireworks were a lot different than the fireworks we have here. They don't try and dazzle you with colors and sounds. The fireworks there went up in the air, kind of like a cannon, and exploded. If you look closely enough after it explodes, you could see shrapnel falling from the sky. It was pretty cool.

There were two types of fireworks, that being the first. The second was a long strip of what looked like paper that they lit on fire. It produced little, loud explosions that went on for over 30 seconds. I haven't been able to hear the same after that.

Now, let's get back to work.

So they set off fireworks, and then began to show us around the worksite. First, they took us to where they were bending rebar into rectangles to use as supports during an earthquake.

The man who was showing us how to make these rectangles picked up a miniature crowbar and began to bend the rebar in what seemed like a completely random fashion and produced a rectangle.

The first couple of times I tried it, I ended up with suitable rectangles but, of course, I had help with my first couple. When it came time for me to do it on my own, I produced a square, not a rectangle.

After this, I decided to try tying the rebar rectangles to longer poles of rebar that would be used as supports for the school. To do this, we bent little strands of wire in an "x" over the rectangles with a series of intricate hand motions.

At one point, a Guatemalan boy, about my age, named, Pedro, was tying these with us. I had the pleasure of working with him, holding the bar up while he tied it, and like wise. I enjoyed his company; although he spoke no English, we still had a couple of laughs over my mistakes. He, of course, was flawless.

What surprised me the most on the first day, and the rest of the week for that matter, was that the Guatemalan people trusted us to do good work. We had learned how to do this stuff the first day, and already, with minimal supervision, they were letting us create the primary support for their school.

The second day was a lot like the first, without the introduction and fireworks. As soon as we got there, we went right to work.

There was five huge mounds of dirt that needed moving, and that didn't seem like a terribly complex task, so I grabbed a wheelbarrow and joined in.

Lots of people helped with the dirt piles. There were people with shovels and hoes, getting the wheelbarrows full, and people taking the wheelbarrows up and down a particularly steep and slippery slope to where we dumped them. There were no accidents, which surprised me.

Every day around 12:30, we were served lunch. It was all cooked by the village women, and it was all delicious.

On the third day at around 10:30, we started mixing cement.

I had the most fun on this day because I got to be in the front of the "bucket brigade." The bucket brigade was a line of about Guatemalans and us, who passed buckets of cement from the cement mixer to where they needed to be dumped along the foundation.

Like I said, I got to be in the front of the brigade. The front was not the safest place to be. In the brigade there were people who would throw the buckets back to the cement mixer, and there were a lot of near misses involving my head.

But the advantage of being in the front was that I was being handed buckets by a Guatemalan boy, and then I got replaced by another local. The man who replaced me dropped bucket that was thrown to him and didn't keep the line flowing.

This provided me with my first cultural experience. The boy who was formerly passing the buckets to me, and now to the man above, looked over at me and said something in Kekchi.

I wouldn't have been able to understand what he said if it wasn't for the way he said it and all the people who laughed after he said it. He said, "When you were going this, it was good."

On the fourth day there was another bucket brigade in the morning, to finish up pouring the cement into the trenches, and then it was time to finish moving the dirt.

We ended up moving all five mounds of dirt, but the ground wasn't quite level. So we grabbed some pick axes and shovels and started correcting that problem.

When it go to be around time to leave, two of the Guatemalan kids had picked up pick axes and were helping us. One of the boy's fathers was watching, and you could tell that he was very proud.

The fourth day was really our last work day, because on the fifth day we just played with the children, said goodbye, and thanked the citizens of La Loma for their hospitality and letting us work with them to build their school.

The work experience, although tiring, proved to be very much worth it, because we all got to learn new things, and work together, to build a school, for a better world.

Julie Rorrer:

When I first heard Charles was taking a group to Guatemala, I had this fuzzy image of standing in front of a half-built school with cute little kids beside me. I had no idea this image would grow into a clear and beautiful memory of the experiences I had in the sweet village of La Loma.

Throughout our journey in Guatemala, we got to take a glimpse into the lives of the Guatemalans and see them as people. When we acted as tourists, shopping in street markets, all I got to see of the children were little boys and girls persistently pushing a sale on an innocent shopper like Mari. It's hard to walk past the wooden flute boy and the bracelet girl when you know they might not eat dinner that night.

But when we traveled past the tourist traps and into the peaceful village of La Loma, I saw a different side of the children. The side you don't see in the big city.

It took a few days for the children to show up. The first day they ran away from us; by the second day they were curious what we were up to; and by the third day we demanded cut kids, so the village delivered. About twenty five darling kids had arrived, so we had to think of a game—and fast! Molly suggested “duck, duck, goose”—a classic! But, the only animals we saw in the village were turkeys and chickens, so we changed the game to “turkey, turkey, chicken!” or “pavo, pavo, gallina?” in Spanish. The kids picked up very quickly and soon they were cheering for Lauren and Beth as they ran around the circle with a bright smiling child close behind them.

What amazed me about the children, and all of the people of Guatemala, was the ease of communication. I knew that even though I spoke Spanish, I didn't know the native languages of Kekchi or Cakchiquel. But Beth was one of the first people to show us that didn't matter. She brought her sketch pad and started drawing and soon tons of children and adults were crowding around and participating in her demonstration of the universal language.

One of the most memorable moments for me was decorating Juan's bus on the Day of St. Christopher. We were driving along the highway on the way to La Loma, and noticed some of the buses we passed were covered in balloons and streamers. Our bus driver, Juan, told us it was El Dia de San Cristóbal, where we celebrate pilots and chauffeurs. So, we decided we should thank Juan by decorating his bus, and what better way than to enlist the children's help. So we took a break from tying rebar and shoveling dirt to make some decorations with the kids. I talked to their teacher in Spanish to make sure everything was okay, and then gave them some instructions. She then translated in Cakchiquel for the children. Soon everyone was at work drawing buses and flowers and animals with crayons on brightly colored paper. Thanks to Laurel's knitting, we had a big ball of yarn, so Molly and Jenny helped the kids string their pictures together.

Imagine hiking up a hill overlooking a beautiful valley of corn stalks and tropical trees, holding hands with sweet kids, with a 40 foot train of children's drawings following behind you. When we got to the bus, the children were playing with balloons, climbing on top of the bus, and tying the string of artwork all around the vehicle. I won't forget Juan's face when he came over the hill and saw the bus there, bursting with balloons and pictures.

What amazed me about our experiences in La Loma was how easily we all became friends, despite the language barrier and the cultural differences. I enjoyed being caught up in translation.

I loved asking our friend, Timateo, in Spanish, how to say words in Cakchiquel. Sometimes getting the message across was a lot like the game of telephone. One of us would ask something in English; Mari, Gary, Marsha, or I would translate to Spanish, and then someone else translated to Kekchi. But I was amazed that somehow the message didn't get too distorted. It wasn't like the game where "I like cake" turns into "I ate a snake." We were all gathered for a common purpose, and we knew language couldn't keep us apart.

So, when I got home, I had all these pictures fresh in my head. Now we're all speaking English, drinking tap water, opening our huge closets full of stuff, and flushing as much toilet paper as we want. But now I realize these things are things I'm willing to give up to reach out to our neighbors in Guatemala. To see their world, and to hold a Guatemalan's hand in one hand and God's hand in the other.