

Self-determination

By Ellen Cafferty, PBVM

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I can only speak as an eyewitness to the efforts toward self - determination of the Mayan people, among whom I have lived and labored during 42 of my 76 years. I admit with some embarrassment that I went to Chiapas, Mexico thinking I was going to teach the people something – after all I was a teacher –but what happened was that the people became my teachers. Their lessons were subtle and unintentional, but little by little they came to form for me a different way of thinking, of seeing all of life in a completely different context than the one into which I had been born and raised. You may ask what all this has to do with self- determination. For me it has everything to do with it, for how can we come to self-determination without knowing who we really are?

I wasn't long in Chiapas when a new volunteer and I visited one of the Tzeltal villages. Between activities the people sat with us and if we didn't speak, we sat in silence, something both of us were uncomfortable with. My companion began commenting on the state of the community school house, which was made from bamboo poles and thatched roofing. "Your school could use fixing up," he said. Our hosts remained silent, so he continued. "Maybe you could clear more land, plant more corn, sell it and fix the school." Finally one of the villagers responded, "When we plant our fields, we ask permission of Mother Earth to break the ground, with the promise that we will take from her only what we need." LESSON #1: TAKE ONLY WHAT YOU NEED.

But there had been a previous lesson that I had missed till I began thinking about it and that was on the treatment of visitors: LESSON # 2: WHAT WE HAVE TO DO IS NOT AS IMPORTANT AS WHO WE ARE WITH.

After a while I became more observant and asked questions instead of giving answers. I saw that the men got together to plant their fields, that they didn't consider them-selves owners of the land and that they interchanged farming plots so

that everyone had access to the most fertile areas. **LESSON #3: WE ALL HAVE A RIGHT TO THE GOODS OF MOTHER EARTH.**

When the women did the family laundry in the river, instead of seeing it as a chore they considered it a time to interchange news, to enjoy their younger children splashing in the water and one another's company. **LESSON #4: LIFE IS MEANT TO BE ENJOYED, EVEN DURING TIMES OF WORK.**

One morning in town I noticed a large group of men from Colonia San Antonio coming up the street. One of the men had a chair held by a thump line on his back with a pale young woman tied to the chair. As I watched, one of the groups stopped and told me that the woman, his sister-in-law, was in labor and could not deliver the baby, so they had brought her in to the dispensary. I calculated that every able man of the community was with her and had probably taken a turn carrying the chair during the 12 mile trek into town. **LESSON #5: THE PROBLEM OF ONE IS THE PROBLEM OF ALL.**

As I became familiar with the Tzeltal language I learned that the people don't ask others what they think, they ask what's in their hearts. To love another is to have pain in the heart and to speak of the Source and Sustainer of life; they speak of and to the **HEART OF HEAVEN, HEART OF EARTH. LESSON #6: THE WHOLE UNIVERSE THROBS WITH THE POWER OF LOVE.**

One day I asked a teen ager how he had learned to respect life in all its forms, so he told me that as a little boy he had killed a spider. A few nights later he sat at the fire as his grandmother made tortillas. "One day, my child," she said to him, "you will make a journey and you will come to wide and sweeping a river that you will not be able to cross unless a spider weaves a web for you." **LESSON #7: EVERY CREATURE HAS A REASON FOR BEING.**

The Presentation sisters were in Chiapas, Mexico, from 1966 to 1987, a time when Tzeltal farmers from ancestral areas where the land was exhausted and peons from the large ranches were moving into the Lacandon Jungle under the government approved ejido system. The system granted the communal use of but not the ownership of lands. This experience was certainly one of self-determination but a short lived one. In 1991, President Carlos Salinas Gortari abrogated the ejido system from the Mexican Constitution, leaving the ejidatarios in the status of squatters. The president's action was a condition for Mexico signing the North American Free Trade Agreement with the US and Canada. Many of the people who had struggled for so long to make a home for them-selves in the jungle and then were deprived of their legal rights to it were those who took another step in self - determination, joining ranks with neighboring Mayan farmers and forming the Zapatista Liberation Movement.

On January 1, 1994, the day that NAFTA was to go into effect, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation came out of the Lacandon Jungle to astound the Mexican government with its demands for justice for the indigenous peoples of Chiapas and

to strike a chord of solidarity throughout the world. This year, on January 1st, the 10th anniversary of their first appearance, 30,000 Zapatistas stood silently but with raised fists in the central square of San Cristobal de las Casas, the indigenous capital of Chiapas, to let the world know that “la lucha sigue” – the struggle goes on.

In 1991 I went south to join one of my sisters in a parish on the outskirts of Guatemala City. It’s an area like all of that in and around the capital that tripled and quadrupled in population during a massive urban migration beginning in the 1980’s, the time of the armed conflict. The exodus from the high lands continues today, bringing the city’s and its surrounding area’s numbers to 5,000,000 people, which is a third of the country’s total population and over half of the entire indigenous population.

The armed conflict was being handled subtly around the capital but raged on in the interior of the country until 1996. Its result was a genocide that obliterated over 400 indigenous communities from the map of Guatemala, General Efraim Rios Mont, who took over the government in a military coup in 1982, was tried for genocide in a case, which was brought against him by the Ixil people in 2013. He was found guilty, a verdict that caused great rejoicing in most sectors of the country. Sadly, it was then over turned by the national Constitutional Court and is now in the appellate court. Subsequently, Claudia Paz y Paz, the attorney general who brought the case to trial was vilified by the mass media and dismissed from her post several months early.

It is only lately, as the extracting companies invade the country, that people are becoming aware that the armed conflict had nothing to do with contradictory political ideologies and everything to do with making mineral rich and water rich territories accessible hydro-electric and mining interests.

During the thirty year conflict the people who migrated to Guatemala City were mostly women and children, the men staying behind to fight in the Guerrilla movement or in the army; with many, too many dying in the struggle. The displaced children, left alone while their mothers sold what they could on the streets or worked as underpaid domestics, grew up fearfully and many times angrily. They were easily assimilated into the mainstream consumer culture and too often became prey to gangs looking for new members to carry out drug deliveries, extortions, assaults and vicious murders. These young people were paid in drugs, became addicted and so completely alienated from reality.

In the area where I live, Na’oj Maya is one of many small but important programs that offer an alternative to gang membership. Its aim is help Kaqchikel children and adolescents rediscover and value their cultural heritage so that, someday, they can come to self – determination. I’m delighted when I listen to the teen agers play the marimba or learn with the children the treasures of their Kaqchikel language.

Their teacher explains: “The root word for hair is the root word for roof and the root word for tree top . . . The root word for leg is also the root word for river bed, for our

grandmothers and grandfathers saw that the river also walks. They saw that everything that lives is connected, everything is ONE.

At Na'oj Maya some of the adults read the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, so I asked them if they had any recommendations for the Conference.

One of the elders responded: If the United Nations could only convince our government to truly recognize these rights, how wonderful it would be. A mother of a college graduate who hasn't been able to find work said: If the UN could influence businesses to hire young people and not reject them because they have Mayan surnames, it would be a great help to our family economy." A teen ager who was listening asked, "Can the UN teach people that making money is not the reason for living? That would make the world very different."

Just over the hill from where Na'oj Maya meets, Kaqchikel farmers are resisting the incursion of CEMENTOS PROGRESO, the largest cement company in Guatemala. When their road blocks effectively stopped the movement of the company's heavy machinery into the area, company representatives went into the area and hired enough people at higher- than- average wages to cause infighting and finally division, but a wiser if weakened community goes on resisting.

When the monumental obstacles to self - determination that the indigenous communities face tempt me to discouragement, I try to recall the story of the young David courageously toppling the jeering giant Goliath with only a river stone in a slingshot. Then I believe again that the indigenous peoples and their love of Mother Earth will triumph.

If only all of us could honor their cosmic vision and see the whole universe as our home; if only we would acknowledge the primary right of Mother Earth to self - determination, we may yet survive. The United Nations has many documents that speak this language and that treat these issues but not every government. Our challenge is to make sure that the struggle continues - QUE SIGA LA LUCHA.

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