

**Indigenous, Homogenous, and/or Christian:  
Healing in International Contexts**

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This presentation will focus on indigenous Christian forms of healing which take seriously local culture, Western psychologies and the Christian tradition. The presentation is divided into three parts:

1. What is meant by indigeneity?
2. What is meant by homogeneity?
3. How can one integrate indigeneity with Christian convictions in therapy?

We begin with a case described below. Paragraphs in quotation marks are Juanita's own words. Paragraphs without quotation marks are our extrapolation and adaptation.

"In 1979, the violence began here. We heard that there was going to be a civil war, but didn't know what that was. They told us that in a civil war there would be dead people in the streets—but it wasn't that way. First, pamphlets were placed under our doors with the name of the organization ORPA. The papers said we should protect the members of this organization, open our doors to them and hide them in our homes. I remember the first day the guerrillas walked by my house. When they passed, they greeted us with, 'Good afternoon, friends,' and I responded by saying, 'God bless you.' I didn't know at the time if they were guerrillas or soldiers, but they greeted us very kindly. They went to the Central Plaza and hung a large ORPA banner. They invited the townspeople to a conference in the plaza. Many went to hear them. There weren't any problems that night; some people gave Coca-Cola, bread, and other gifts to this group who had come into the community.

"The next day, there were problems. The first thing we heard was that my brothers appeared on a list that was being circulated. It had the names of all the people who had attended the meeting. You see, the military has its commissioners, representatives who spy in the community. It was just a few days later that the army came and that night we had our first kidnapping. The first to be kidnapped was a distant relative, whom we were close to, and another man. People were afraid. I went to visit the wife of the man. She didn't know why they had taken her husband, but they were armed and wearing white clothing.

"The next day there was another kidnapping...this time an ex-seminarian. He was asleep in his bed. They kicked the door in, dragged him out of bed and threw him against the wall so many times that his head split open and left bloodstains on the wall. The kidnappings went on and on, not just at nighttime, but in the daytime when people went out to work in their fields and didn't return. The violence became so bad that people didn't even sleep in their own homes. I went to stay with my sister. Only the military had the right to walk in the streets after 5 p.m.

"The community joined together by opening the churches and starting a prayer chain. But we couldn't resolve anything, and many people went to sleep in the churches thinking that the violence

would end in just a matter of days. There were so many people in the church that we had to sleep sitting up. At that time, the army did not have the right to enter the churches. The violence continued and we couldn't keep staying at the churches. People stopped coming to visit us here as everyone was afraid to walk around the streets.

"I remember a day when things were a little calmer for us when the army left at Christmas time. When they left, we celebrated a peaceful Christmas, New Years, and also Three Kings Day all without the military. They left for only two weeks. They returned on January 7 (1980) around midday. Two truckloads of soldiers passed by my house. A few minutes later we heard the first shots...gunshots, bombs, or grenades...I'm not sure. A Canadian friend came by and asked me where my husband was working and I pointed towards the gunfire. I got really afraid—the shooting wouldn't stop. The streets were full of people. We were asking each other, 'Where is your husband? Where is your son? Where is your father?' Later that afternoon two helicopters arrived. The doors were open and soldiers were pointing guns down at the community. We were all afraid and I began to cry because I had no news of my husband or my father.

"The gunfire stopped about 5 p.m. We saw the trucks coming this way and we hid in the house. I still had hope that my husband was alive. The community organized a commission to go to the area of shooting and investigate. Some of my relatives were on the commission; I stayed in the house with my children and my mother. The first person they found was a teacher and he was dead. Then they found another pregnant teacher, also dead. They walked near the edge of the lake and found a man whose whole torso was cut open. Others were tied to coffee plants. The commission returned with some of the bodies and reported what they had found."<sup>1</sup>

"My brother came by my house and didn't say anything; he just hugged me. He couldn't find the words to tell me that my husband was nowhere to be found. At that moment, I could not cry. I lost control and began to scream. People kept coming with more information about others who had been found dead and others who had disappeared. I gathered up all of my husband's clothing and put it in the middle of the floor and cried over it with my children. I spent the whole night wailing. It didn't resolve anything, but the next day I received more news. Someone informed me that my husband had been found on the coast and that he was dead. I don't know how to explain the pain and sadness that I felt.

"Unfortunately, that day I did not have even enough money to bring his body back to Santiago. I had 20 quetzals but I thought, 'What can I do with 20 quetzals? Can I go get him or not?' I had to pay for a car, buy a coffin, and pay for the paperwork at the funeral home. With 20 quetzals you really can't do anything. But I wanted to see my husband for the last time. 'I am going to bring him back even if I don't have a coffin,' I thought. 'With 20 quetzals, I can pay for a car and I'll buy a plastic bag to put him in.' I was the first one to leave the community, and I was not afraid. We had heard that anyone who left would be taken in the road. Not even my brothers would go. My sisters and a 16-year old niece went with me. I spent the whole trip screaming, 'Miguel, wait for me,' because we had heard that if the family didn't arrive right away, they would throw the body away.

"When we arrived in the hospital in Mazatenango, it was so sad. Every time I tell this story, I have the face and body of my husband in my mind. His death was a horrible one! The soldiers who killed him were merciless. He was a laborer and when I found him he was no longer Miguel...he was tortured. He was strangled and they had torn off the soles of his feet. He was slit in the face with a machete and his whole body was lacerated. I began to talk to that body there. I said, 'You weren't a

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the story of Concepcion Sojuel, as told to a SELF-HELP study tour in March, 1995. Available from Semilla, 26 Calle 15-56 Col. Las Charcas, Z. 11, Guatemala City, Guatemala. Reprinted with her permission.

guerrilla; you haven't used weapons. You are an innocent man. Why did they kill you? We are a simple family.' When I hugged him, he was so full of blood that I covered myself with blood.

"Afterward, fear was the worst thing for us. I lost consciousness. I didn't even think about my children. I even thought it would have been better if one of them would have died instead. Even now, I have an emptiness in my heart and no one can fill that space. I was out of control. I took my pencil and wrote a letter. I said in my mind I would like to come face to face with a soldier because I knew it wasn't the guerrillas, it was the army who killed my husband. In this letter, I left my two children in the charge of one of my sisters. I made a very important decision. I went walking to the mountains to look for the guerrillas (to join them) and didn't find any. I returned to the cemetery where my husband was buried and began to cry.

"From that day on, I haven't been able to stand the army. Every time the army walks by my house, I hate them. I have lost a lot of weight, from 140 to 90 pounds. From all the sadness, I began to lose my hair and even my eyebrows. I could find no solution. I wanted my husband back and I just got sadder and sadder. I couldn't work. I talked with some neighbors and began to wash dishes and clean their house. They gave me food for my children because I could not sell any of my weavings. There were no tourists. This was how my life moved forward, but in my mind it was the same. Every time I had a problem with my children, I went to the cemetery to consult my husband. My friend told me I should try some drugs because I could not calm my mind; so I tried smoking marijuana, but my hands and legs felt really fat. True, I didn't think about my husband nor my father."

Given the dwindling family income, Juanita left Santiago, the village she loved. After her husband's death she learned to string beads at Chonita's Beadwork, a small business begun by a war widow. Conception, the owner, took in women, taught them a trade, and gave them a community of hope. Here too she met Miguel, who came regularly to their little business and ferried their goods to markets in Panachatchel, Chichicastenango, and Guatemala City. Their courtship consisted of revival meetings at Iglesia del Buen Pastor. When a relative from Los Angeles encouraged them to come to the US, they did not hesitate.

Unable to obtain legal entry, they entered California at a small border crossing with fake papers. Miguel was able to find work immediately in the Los Angeles garment industry while Juanita provided domestic help. Their children were farmed out for daycare to their few friends. Now, five years later, Juanita is twenty-eight. They have three children and are very active in a charismatic Pentecostal community.

When Juanita enters therapy for depression several years after arriving in the United States, will her voice be heard? She does not view her current emotional state as clinical depression. She sees her coming to the United States as a gift from God and cannot understand her sadness. She attends church faithfully with her family and feels she listens carefully to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Will the therapist who operates out of his Western, liberal paradigm, truly hear her ethnic and religious voice? Will he/she be cognizant of the larger political context of Juanita's sadness? Will our complicity in that story be considered relevant?

We will create a therapist for Juanita. Dr. Davidson is a product of the modern, secular university. A counselor at the school where her children attend referred Juanita for therapy. She presented to her therapist, Dr. Davidson, as quite depressed. She had shared how difficult the children were and how sad she felt. She reported that she often felt homesick, overwhelmed with parenting and work. She also told of recurring nightmares in which she saw people falling down in

cornfields. When Dr. Davidson asked her to talk about her childhood she said that she grew up with parents who loved her and whom she loved in return. She described her home as a loving home filled with happiness and joy. Her parents were Evangelical Christians whose lives were immersed in the church. It was in the purple church with the loudspeakers that Juanita had “gone forward.”

The therapist, Dr. Davidson, is a forty-five year-old white male who grew up in an urban setting, was trained as a clinical psychologist at an American research university and enjoys hiking and reading novels in his non-working hours. He stated in his tax report for the past year that his income was \$127,000. He is married and has two children, ages 12 and 14. Both are in private schools and doing well academically. His wife is a lawyer with a local firm.

Dr. Davidson was trained in short-term therapy and, since his work is primarily with clients referred from health maintenance organizations, the number of sessions is limited. His approach with Juanita was to introduce her to democratic approaches to parenting, cognitive restructuring to address the depression, and stress management. He provided her with literature in Spanish which summarized in lay terms the meaning of depression and what seems to help alleviate the depression based on current research, and suggested she keep a journal of depressive thoughts.

Since Juanita indicated she had a religious background, and because the research literature indicated a connection between spirituality and mental health, Dr. Davidson encouraged spiritual coping strategies. Juanita was pleased, but the language did not sound remotely Pentecostal. Juanita obediently completed four sessions but did not return for further counseling. She indicated that the counselor was kind and gentle. However, she reports that what he said just did not ring true. It is not that she thought he was wrong but that she simply could not connect with his suggestions regarding stress, parenting, and inner talk. She felt that the therapist was not really like a pastor and that the suggestions he made were more techniques than convictions.

What language does Juanita speak? Not only is there the issue of the quality of her English, there is the bonding of her spirituality to Spanish. When Dr. Davidson asked Juanita what happened after she lost her husband and why she felt the way she did, she answered in broken English and in her spiritual mother tongue.

“I forgot about God. I didn’t go to church for a year. I didn’t pray. I kept saying that God does not exist. I believed that because my husband was a peaceful man. He didn’t play sports or go to parties. He liked to go to church and visit the sick. His sport was religion. What a pity that God didn’t help my husband. I was lost. I sold oranges in the street and tried to change my attitude and raise money to maintain my children. But there was always violence. When there was a death, the funeral procession always passed by my house on the way to the cemetery. I would join the procession and wail and cry.

“Finally I was asked to work in a nutrition center, and I began to change a lot. I met other women who were widows and realized that my children weren’t the only ones without a father. My attitude was changed and I needed to give care to other children. I really liked that work. I also organized groups of women and we began to share about the deaths of our husbands. Later, I had to ask forgiveness of God. I had to give this testimony to the other women. We organized visits to the home of widows. We would take food or something to help the family. We suffered in the nutrition center also. The army came and accused the children of being children of guerrillas and said support for the center came from guerrillas. They searched everything. The children were very afraid. The center was closed for a year or two. I was left again without work and the violence continued.

“At that time I worked in a clinic as a health promoter, but the salary was really low. I only earned about \$20.00 a month. I began to work with a Guatemalan woman and other widows

creating and selling beadwork. I liked to do beadwork, and I was paid well. The mothers of the young women did crocheting. It was easier and not so hard on their eyes (as beadwork). Our goal was to be able to send some of the children to school, to get a little bit of education. There were a number of children who could not go to school.

“I was in another group of women, but lamentably the man who was in charge took all the money for himself and didn’t share it with us. That is why we didn’t want to have men in our groups. Men don’t know what the suffering of women is. It isn’t a lie, what I am telling you. There are many men who take advantage of women, so I only want to work with women. Women have a special courage!”

Juanita’s depressive symptoms persisted. A friend at her church recommended a women’s center that might help her as it addressed the psychological and spiritual losses of the civil war. The program used Mayan religious and cultural symbols and narratives in order to facilitate the grief and trauma recovery process but filled them with Christian themes.<sup>2</sup> And, it was free.

When Juanita arrived at the center she met other Guatemalan women.<sup>3</sup> In the work area they were doing beadwork, an immediate connection with her past in Santiago. She sat quietly beside one woman from Panajachel who had come to the US some years earlier. For several weeks Juanita returned to sit with the women, eventually creating a necklace of her own.

Juanita did not have an individual therapist as all work was done in a group and the leader, herself from rural Guatemala, spoke only Quiché when they gathered. She too had experienced the trauma of war – loss of family members, leaving her home behind, and moving to another country. Scattered around the room Juanita saw traditional candles, a small clay stove, corn, mortar and pestle, a calendar, and other objects she recognized from her early years in Santiago.

Much of their time together was spent talking about the events of the week, their children and, of course, the pain of the past. Some months after arriving, the group leader brought out a bag of corn together with a mortar and pestle. Juanita remembered the times her mother would make flour for the tortillas the family loved. Sitting with others who too had experienced loss, Juanita could feel sadness creep into her body. As she ground the corn she found herself weeping. Those near her held her in their arms. Others began humming a song Juanita had not heard since she left Santiago. It was a song they had sung often as part of their celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The song told of their ancestors who grew corn, plucked the ears, let them dry, and then rubbed them to release the kernels. It retold the story of Jesus’ life, his nourishing love for others. Then the tune echoed the rhythmic crushing of the corn, and the lyrics told of the betrayal of Jesus and of Christ’s painful death on a cross. The song closed with the rising of the dough, the smells of the baking

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<sup>2</sup> The program that we use here to illustrate a peaceable ethnic and spiritual psychotherapy is adapted from the program that I (AD) encountered in San Juan del K’iche, Guatemala. It is called “Utz K’aslema,” which in the local Indian dialect of K’iche means, “The Good Life.” See Bárbara Ford, Roberto Cabrera, and Virginia Searing, *Buscando una Buena vida: Tres experiencias de salud mental comunitaria* (Guatemala: Redd Barna, 2000); Asociación Utz K’aslema Salud Mental Comunitaria El Quiché, *Construyendo una Buena vida* (Noruega, Save the Children, n.d.). The inclusion of Christian themes is our addition. The authors are grateful for the assistance of Steven Huett and Jenel Ramos in the research and development of this section.

<sup>3</sup> What made the approach unique was that it did not focus on “mental health” or on a Western “psychology” but built on an indigenous Mayan understanding of the self. See Bruce Olson’s indigenously sensitive approach to giving medical advice. Bruce Olson, *Bruchko* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1978).

bread, the bread broken for others to eat, and the risen Christ who brings new life. Juanita could not sing with them but she did eat the warm tortillas and she did not forget the event.<sup>4</sup>

A year after Juanita had joined the women's group, the leader raised the possibility of returning to Guatemala. Juanita had not returned to Santiago for a number of years. The facilitator went on to indicate that individuals from the Catholic diocese in Guatemala City were traveling to remote mountain areas to talk with villagers about what had happened. One of Juanita's friends in the group had been on one of these trips and said that they were digging up mass graves, giving the dead a proper burial. Juanita thought about her father. Was his name on a list of the missing? She remembered some vague details about his disappearance but would they be enough? How would she pay for the expenses for such a trip? Would her family support her? Who would go with her?

Six months later Juanita, the facilitator and three others traveled to the Lake Atitlán area where Juanita's father had disappeared. The night before the dig was to begin the group met in the Ecclesia del Buen Pastor for prayer and meditation. Juanita was able to reveal her fears and anxieties to the others. This was bringing back vivid memories of those dark days. The group listened and held her as Juanita once again spoke of her loss, the years of sadness and her hope for resolution. She asked them to read the story of Lazarus. She wept when Jesus wept. She chose to read where Jesus commanded Lazarus to come forth. She was comforted. The facilitator gently reminded her that they might not find her father. Juanita remained silent.

The next day, in the chilly mountain air, the group that came to exhume the bodies began their work. By mid morning they had uncovered nothing but just before lunch there was a shout and the first bones, those of a young boy, were discovered. Juanita felt a pang of fear. Continuing with the help of candles, they worked on until late carefully removing, tagging, and bagging the scattered remains. Juanita knew that it would take some time for the forensic experts to identify her father's body. Something changed inside.

Some months later, Juanita received a letter indicating that her father's body had been among those exhumed. Would she wish to return for the reburial? When she returned to Santiago for the funeral, the entire extended family she had left behind was there to grieve with her. After the burial they returned to the church. A picture of her father surrounded by candles was prominent at the front. Tears, hugging and singing followed. Older persons who remembered Juanita's father told stories of quieter and more joyous times in Santiago. They remembered the march to the garrison, the martyred, the disappearances, and the glimmerings of peace. At the end of the service, Juanita herself praised her father for the example he had been, for his love of God and the community of believers. Juanita returned to Los Angeles a different person. There was still sorrow but the paralyzing depression had lifted.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Corn is central to life and spirituality of indigenous Guatemalan people. See Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, trans. A. Wright (London: Verso, 1984). In the Utz K'aslemal program, corn comes to symbolize the hardship and suffering of Quiché people. The mortar, pestle and corn are reframed for the group that corn is initially hard and unusable, but when ground into flour, into something soft, it becomes nourishing. "Those pains and experiences can become food for our life, just like the corn is food for our body. In order to turn all that pain into food, we must soften it, grind it and knead it, as we do with the corn. But it is not the work of a day only, but always we must return to our pains to soften them, to grind them and to knead them in the way of our life" (Ford, Cabrera and Searing, *Buscando una Buena vida*, 69). No wonder the participants begin to weep.

<sup>5</sup> This experience of Juanita's is adapted from the PBS documentary of Denise Becker entitled "Discovering Dominga." It is described at: <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2003/discoveringdominga/>