
THE POWER OF POWERLESSNESS: The Life and Work of Merlie “Milet” B. Mendoza of the Philippines

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2010 Women PeaceMakers Program

Made possible by the Fred J. Hansen Foundation

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemakers' own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemakers' work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.¹

**BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER –
MERLIE “MILET” B. MENDOZA**



Photo credit: Michelle Zousmer

Peace practitioner and humanitarian Merlie “Milet” B. Mendoza of the Philippines has over two decades of peacebuilding experience ranging from the Office of the President in Manila to the conflicted frontlines of Mindanao. Currently Mendoza teaches social work and disaster management and provides technical support on disaster response and risk reduction to church-based social action organizations within the Catholic Caritas network in the Philippines.

Beginning in 1989 with the Corazon Aquino administration, Mendoza served for a decade in various presidential departments, including the Peace Commission and the National Unification Commission. She then assisted the Government Peace Negotiating Panel for Talks with the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People’s Army/National Democratic Front, organizing peace consultations to understand the issues facing those in conflict areas. She transitioned from the government to the grassroots in 1999, becoming executive coordinator of *Tabang Mindanaw* (“Help Mindanao”), a national coalition for peace policy advocacy, humanitarian assistance and human security in Mindanao. While also coordinating the Assisi Development Foundation’s Free the Indigenous Peoples Program, a legal assistance organization affiliated with the Ateneo Human Rights Center, Mendoza facilitated the release of 12 indigenous people unjustly imprisoned for life.

Mendoza coordinated emergency humanitarian assistance through *Tabang Mindanaw* in the aftermath of widespread drought caused by the 1998 El Niño and from 2000 to 2003 for the 1 million civilians displaced by the war between government forces and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Her commitment to those affected and displaced by any disaster has been a common thread in her work. She is a founding member of the Asian Disaster Response and Reduction Network – an alliance of more than 30 national and local humanitarian and social development NGOs in 16 countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region, where more than half of the world’s disasters have occurred over the past 50 years.

In September 2008, soon after Mendoza began serving marginalized Muslim communities in the Sulu archipelago as an independent volunteer, she was abducted by the militant separatist group Abu Sayyaf and held hostage for two months. Since her release, Mendoza continues to help communities recognize their rights, access justice and create peace in the Philippines. “Peacemaking and conflict management go beyond the rational. They touch on the sacred and the divine,” Mendoza believes. “It is a combination of art and a science. It is about goodness.”

CONFLICT HISTORY – THE PHILIPPINES

The Republic of the Philippines is an archipelago of 7,107 islands in the western Pacific Ocean, between Taiwan on the north and Vietnam on the west.² To the southwest lies Borneo, and to the south Indonesia. It has abundant natural resources and extraordinary biodiversity. Its main geographical divisions, from north to south, are Luzon, where the capital, Manila, is located; the Visayas; and Mindanao-Sulu. With an estimated population of more than 94 million people, the Philippines is the world's 12th most populous country. Located in the Pacific ring of fire, the nation has suffered throughout its history from earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other dramatic, destructive geological events.

Before the arrival of Muslim traders, Spanish conquistadors and U.S. colonizers, the islands were a patchwork of indigenous peoples and those who had settled there from other lands. Between the 13th and 15th centuries, when Muslim traders brought their faith to the region along with their goods, some southern indigenous tribes converted voluntarily to Islam.

In 1521 the Spanish conquistador Ferdinand Magellan claimed the archipelago in the name of King Phillip II. The Spanish exacted tribute and forced labor from Luzon and the Visayas, the north and central regions, and converted the population to Catholicism. They colonized substantial portions of territory in northern and eastern Mindanao, but were never able to exert political control over all the Muslim and indigenous peoples of Mindanao and Sulu. In 1898, when the United States won control of the Philippines from Spain in the Spanish-American War, both the Sultanate of Sulu and the later Sultanate of Maguindanao were still in power.

The country was in the midst of a nationwide revolt against the Spanish, fueled by the literary and political ardor of national heroes like Jose Rizal and Andres Bonifacio. These activists evoked the indigenous traditions as a source of national unity, though without much real acquaintance with the indigenous.

The U.S. military suppression of Filipino resistance that began in 1898 lasted until 1913 (though U.S. histories mark 1902 as the end of the Philippine-American War) and cost tens of thousands of Filipino lives and thousands of American lives. The fighting lasted longest in Mindanao and Sulu.

Compared to the Spanish, the United States practiced a relatively subtle cultural and economic imperialism, promising to prepare the nation for eventual independence. The elites were easily co-opted, and the population at large benefited from the introduction of public schools and modern infrastructure.

In 1899, the year after U.S. control began, the Sultan of Sulu co-signed the Bates Treaty, in which the United States pledged non-interference in Sulu. Just four years later, in 1903, the Moro (Muslim) Province was established there under U.S. civil and military rule, and U.S. policy encouraged the migration of large numbers of Christians from the northern Philippines to the south. This state-sponsored migration, intended to relieve the poverty of landless Christian Visayans in the central region, caused displacement, impoverishment and marginalization for the Moros and

Lumads (indigenous peoples), whose land they occupied. The United States also opened Muslim and indigenous lands in the south and elsewhere in the archipelago to foreign corporations for resource extraction.³ These policies are the roots of the continuing conflict in Mindanao and Sulu.

In colonial times, Christian school children were taught to regard Moros and other non-Christians as “uncivilized.” Many remember being told, “The only good Moro is a dead Moro.” With no understanding of one another’s cultures, each of the three groups saw the others as alien, and at least some elements of each group behaved in ways that reinforced those harsh judgments.

Political control of the Moro Province was transferred from U.S. military to U.S. civilian administration in 1913, and in 1935 the United States transferred power to the commonwealth government of Manuel Quezon. The Philippines was promised full independence within 10 years. Unfortunately, World War II intervened.

The Japanese defeated a U.S.-Philippine force and occupied the country, setting up a puppet government in 1942. During the war years from 1942 to 1946, more than 1 million Filipinos lost their lives and the country’s infrastructure was all but destroyed. Though the United States formally granted independence to the Philippines in 1946, American influence and control remained strong through the decades ahead. Fervent anti-communism tarred most movements for social justice. For the south, the incursion of settlers and the expropriation of land continued through the decades ahead.

In 1965, Ferdinand Marcos won the presidential elections and began his first term. The Jabidah Massacre on Corregidor Island in 1968 (in which army troops killed 26 Muslim army recruits) led to the formation of Muslim vigilante groups, which in turn triggered the creation of a Christian vigilante group known as the *Ilaga*, or “Rats.” An armed Muslim resistance movement, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, fighting to create an independent Moro state on the islands of Mindanao, the Sulu archipelago and Palawan (located in the western Philippines).

Nearing the end of his second term and barred from seeking a third by the nation’s constitution, President Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in 1972. His justification was the threat of communism and militant Moros. He abolished Congress and instituted other draconian measures, controlling the media and using public relations cannily to project a benign populist image. He called his regime “smiling martial law”⁴ and described his goal as building a “New Society,” a *Bagong Lipunan*.

In 1976, the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MNLF signed an accord called the Tripoli Agreement, which led to divisions in the MNLF and a breakaway faction, known by the late 1980s as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), began carrying out its own attacks on government forces. The agreement was never fully implemented, and fighting continued.

On August 21, 1983, Senator Benigno Aquino, a strong Marcos critic who had taken refuge in the United States, decided to return home. A shocked nation witnessed his assassination on television, and few believed Marcos’ suggestion that the communists were to blame. By 1986, even

Marcos knew his mandate had expired. He responded to political pressure by calling for a snap election – and rigging it. When the count showed him ahead of Corazon Aquino, widow of Benigno, by 1,500,000 votes, the discontent boiled over and he was forced to resign by popular demand in the historic non-violent People Power Revolution.

Corazon Aquino had promised she would not run for re-election. Her single term was interrupted by military coup attempts in 1987, 1988 and 1989. She created the Office of the Peace Commissioner in August 1987, and successive administrations have continued to institutionalize peace efforts. President Fidel V. Ramos created the National Unification Commission in September 1992, which evolved into the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), created by executive order in September 1993. OPAPP is still in operation and hosts the government’s current peace negotiating panels.

In 1996, the MNLF signed a final peace agreement with the government, but the MILF refused to recognize it, believing the agreement betrayed the ideals for which the Moro struggle had been launched. The new peace negotiations continued for 11 years, from 1997 to 2008, punctuated by violent clashes between the MILF and government forces. Four of those years were devoted to crafting a Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), a key issue in the peace talks and an essential step in defending the homeland of the Moro people. Government and MILF leaders agreed to the MOA-AD and initialed the document in late July 2008. On August 4, the day before the formal signing ceremony, the Supreme Court of the Philippines issued a restraining order to block the agreement, which the court later declared unconstitutional. Fighting between the MILF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) broke out immediately, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians and dashing the hopes of millions.

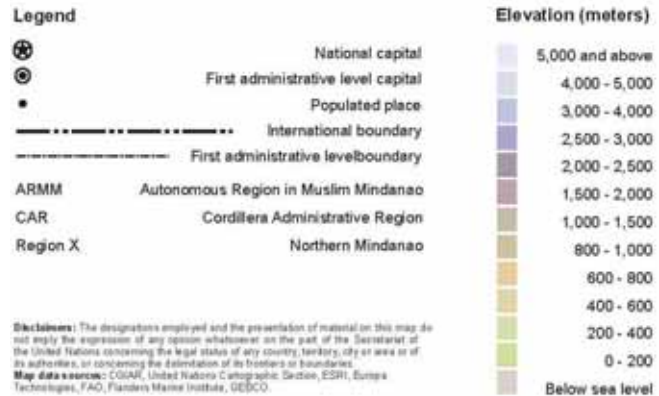
The *Abu Sayyaf* Group, or ASG, is a small, loosely organized radical Islamist organization that splintered off the MNLF in 1991. The group, which operates primarily in the southern islands of Sulu and Basilan, is listed by the United States as a terrorist organization. It funds its activities by kidnapping and banditry, and has been implicated in many killings. The United States, for its part, has paid out over \$80 million in bounties for captured “terrorists” under a worldwide program called Rewards for Justice.⁵ The Philippines/ASG webpage of the program features five individuals, each with a \$5 million price on his head. Four of the five are marked “Deceased.”

In addition to the Moro insurgencies, the National People’s Army, the armed wing of the communist party, has been fighting an insurgency against the government since the early 1970s.

Joachim Von Amsberg, World Bank country director for the Philippines, East Asia and the Pacific Region, calls the unrest in the Philippines the world’s second oldest internal conflict, only somewhat younger than that between north and south Sudan.⁶ In this long history of conflict, structural violence plays a role more important than that of any single armed faction, and its effects are particularly pronounced in Mindanao and Sulu. Poverty, fatalism, lack of education and corrupt, largely absentee government intertwine to reinforce each other. The rough justice of clan and tribal revenge – known as *rido* – flourishes in the absence of an effective justice system. Corruption by local leaders is a legacy of feudal and colonial, pre-democratic worldviews, in which rulers hold no obligation to the inhabitants. As historian Samuel Tan notes, people have still failed to “decolonize their values,” so “the bond of national unity is as elusive as the reality of peace.”⁷

The relative weakness of government at all levels makes the role of faith-based groups and other civil society organizations particularly important for the Philippines. Interfaith peace networks like the Bishops-Ulama Conference and peace and development coalitions like *Tabang Mindanaw* have coordinated across social sectors to respond to both natural and human-made disasters and lift up the importance of even small gains.

In 2009 and early 2010, the government-MILF peace process continued to inch forward. An International Contact Group was formed as a guarantor of the peace process, and the International Monitoring Team returned after departing when armed conflict resumed in late 2008.⁸ Though many parts of Mindanao and Sulu are free-fire zones to this day, Filipinos have high hopes for the presidency of Benigno C. Aquino III, which began in 2010.⁹



INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in the Philippines and *Personal History of Merlie (Milet) B. Mendoza*

- 1380** Muslims arrive in what is now the southern Philippines and convert some of the indigenous tribes to Islam.
- 1450** Sultanate of Abu Bakr (Jolo, Sulu) unites four ethnic groups under a peaceful, stable kingdom of the south.
- 1521** Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan lands in the Philippine archipelago and claims it on behalf of Spain.
- 1565** Spanish colonization begins.
- 1892** Jose Rizal, a physician and author of influential political novels, founds the organization La Liga Filipina with Andres Bonifacio and others to give the people a chance for direct involvement in the reform movement against the Spanish.
- 1898** The United States defeats Spain in the Spanish-American War.
- 1899** The Bates Treaty, pledging non-interference in Mindanao, is signed between the United States and the Sultan of Sulu in Mindanao. The U.S. military suppression of Filipino resistance that followed lasted until 1913 and cost thousands of lives.
- 1903 – 1904** The Moro Province is created under U.S. civil and military rule, and U.S. policy encourages the migration of Christians from the northern Philippines to Muslim and indigenous lands in Mindanao. The policy also encouraged corporate exploitation of natural resources.
- 1935** The United States transfers control of the Philippines to the commonwealth government of Manuel Quezon. The Philippines is promised full independence within 10 years.
- 1942** During World War II, the Japanese occupy the Philippines after they defeat a U.S.-Philippine force, with heavy Filipino casualties.
- 1946** After the end of World War II, the United States grants independence to the Philippines. Nearly all industry had been destroyed. Government-sponsored and U.S.-favored migration of Christians from other areas of the Philippines to Mindanao continues.
- 1964** ***Merlie, nicknamed “Milet,” is born, along with twin sister Mirali, to Mirardo and Alicia Barrera-Mendoza. She is christened Lourdes Merlie Barrera Mendoza.***

- 1965** Ferdinand Marcos wins presidential elections and begins his first term.
- 1968** Thirty Muslim recruits are killed by the Philippine army on Corregidor Island, in what would become known as the Jabidah Massacre. The Bangsamoro (Muslim) rebellion dates from this time, as does the non-violent assertion of indigenous rights.
- 1969** The New People’s Army, the armed branch of the Community Party of the Philippines, is formed and begins its guerilla struggle against Marcos and the Philippine army.
- Milet and three siblings begin school with the Dominican sisters in Quezon City, Metro Manila.***
- 1970s** The *Ilaga*, or “Rats,” a Christian vigilante group, forms to combat Muslim and communist insurgents. Their brutal methods further divide the tri-people communities of Mindanao: Moros, indigenous peoples and Christian settlers.
- 1971** ***The Mendozas move from Quezon City to Caloocan City, also in Greater Manila.***
- 1972** The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), led by Nur Misuari, begins its armed campaign for Moro independence.
- In reaction to domestic unrest, the communist insurgency and the Moro armed struggle, Marcos declares martial law, suspends parliament, arrests opposition politicians and imposes censorship.
- 1975** Peace talks begin between the MNLF and Philippine government.
- 1976** The government and MNLF sign the Tripoli Peace Agreement, but it is not implemented and fighting continues.
- 1978** A leader in the MNLF, Salamat Hashim, breaks from the group and later forms the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).
- Martial law is lifted. President Marcos wins presidential election.
- 1980** ***Milet graduates from high school and enters St. Paul College of Quezon City.***
- 1983** Opposition leader Benigno Aquino returns to the Philippines from exile in the United States. He is assassinated at the airport on August 21.
- Milet visits indigenous peoples’ communities in Nueva Vizcaya in Luzon as a member of Radio Veritas’ LOVE Outreach Team.***

- 1984 *Milet graduates from college with a B.Sc. in psychology and begins work as a personnel manager at Cityland Development Corporation.*
- 1986 Marcos calls a snap election for February 7 and rigs the results.
- Milet volunteers with NAMFREL, the National Movement for Free Elections, during the snap election.*
- The non-violent People Power Revolution forces Marcos from office and installs his opponent, Aquino’s widow Corazon, as president on February 25.
- Milet and her family join the four-day People Power Revolution.*
- The Aquino administration responds to the MNLF demand for autonomy by amending the constitution with a provision for creating an Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).
- 1988 – 1990 *Milet starts graduate classes in sociology at Ateneo de Manila University, joins the Aquino Administration’s Peace Commission and works for the presidential adviser on rural development, who was also the deputy peace commissioner.*
- 1990 The ARMM is created but does not include all 13 provinces demanded by the MNLF.
- 1991 *Milet moves to the Office of the Peace Commissioner as a program officer.*
- 1992 Former military officer Fidel Ramos wins presidential elections.
- Milet heads the Public Consultations’ Secretariat for the National Unification Commission under the Ramos Administration.*
- 1993 *Milet becomes peace program officer and later director in the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP).*
- 1993 – 1994 *Milet helps coordinate the National Convention of Peace Partners and the First Social Reform Agenda Summit in Manila.*
- Milet becomes division chief of the Peace Consultation and Network Coordination Programs, tasked with consensus building on the peace and reform agenda, empowerment for peace, liaison with the nongovernment peace constituency, and mobilization of peoples’ participation in the peace process.*
- 1996 A peace agreement between the government and the MNLF establishes a Special Zone for Peace and Development, which covered all the provinces specified in the

Tripoli Agreement. The MILF rejects the agreement, but starts peace talks with the Ramos administration.

Milet serves as OPAPP project director for logistics for the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Second International Forum on the Culture of Peace, held in Manila.

1996 – 1999 *Milet joins the technical secretariat of the Government Peace Panel for Talks with the Communist Party of the Philippines, New People's Army and National Democratic Front, headed by former ambassador to the Vatican, Howard Q. Dee.*

1997 The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (Republic Act Number 8371) is adopted by Congress, creating a National Commission on Indigenous Peoples.

1998 *Milet resigns from government and joins Ambassador Dee's Assisi Development Foundation as executive coordinator of the multi-sectoral, nongovernmental organization consortium Tabang Mindanaw. The consortium is co-founded with the Catholic bishops of Mindanao to respond to the critical humanitarian needs of millions of indigenous peoples (IP) and others in south-central Mindanao who are affected by El Niño.*

Movie actor Joseph Estrada is elected president. He soon launches an "all-out war" against the MILF.

1999 *Milet coordinates Tabang Mindanaw II, the transition from relief to rehabilitation of drought-affected IP areas. It is a combined effort of diocesan-IP desks, civil society and government agencies to pursue development interventions, specifically water systems, sustainable agriculture learning farms, indigenous health care and community schools.*

2000 *Milet coordinates emergency humanitarian assistance during the all-out war between government forces and the MILF in Mindanao.*

2001 Estrada is forced from office on charges of corruption during "People Power II." Vice-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is sworn in as president. She re-starts peace talks with the MILF under an "all-out peace" policy.

Milet helps coordinate massive humanitarian relief work in Mindanao, together with the government's Department of Social Welfare and Development, National Disaster Coordinating Council, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Tabang Mindanaw and many international agencies.

Milet extends technical support to Ambassador Dee, newly appointed Presidential Adviser on Indigenous Peoples' Affairs and tasked by President

Arroyo to reorganize and reconstitute the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples.

Milet assists her Tabang principals, including the bishops of Cotabato and Kidapawan, in the initial exploratory discussion with the internally displaced peoples of Pikit, Cotabato, in their return and rehabilitation needs, giving birth to the peoples' sanctuaries of peace. Parallel meetings take place with Philippine defense and military officials in Manila and at the local level.

2002 *Milet, representing Tabang Mindanaw, participates at the Asian Conference of Humanitarian Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in Kobe, Japan, Sixteen Asian-led NGOs decide to establish a coordination network, the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN).*

Negotiations between the government and the MILF continue on and off. Meanwhile, in the Sulu archipelago, the United States sends troops to aid the Armed Forces of the Philippines against the extremist group Abu Sayyaf, which the United States has labeled a terrorist organization.

Milet begins coordinating Tabang Mindanaw III to respond to the plight of hundreds of thousands of people deported from Sabah, Malaysia to the Sulu archipelago.

Milet facilitates the commissioning of the Ateneo de Zamboanga Research Center to conduct research on the state of human security in Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, the poorest and most conflict-ridden region of the Philippines.

Milet helps implement the Peace and Human Security Program in Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, which provides co-funding for two microfinance programs for 1,200 women in Basilan and Sulu, and the training of 150 youth for livelihood opportunities.

Milet coordinates the Free the IP Prisoners Social Justice Program, co-implemented with the Ateneo Human Rights Center.

2003 February – War commences when government troops attack an MILF base in Buliok. The renewed fighting displaces hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Milet provides technical support in the low-profile peace advocacy of Tabang Mindanaw. Meetings between Tabang co-chairs and bishops, government and MILF leaders results in the affirmation of peace goals by both sides and eventually to a cease-fire and the resumption of peace talks.

2004 Arroyo wins the presidential election.

Milet assists in the strengthening of institutional partnerships between the Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples, IP apostolate diocesan coordinators and IP leaders.

Milet earns an international diploma in humanitarian assistance from the Center for International Humanitarian Cooperation at Fordham University.

2005 *Milet coordinates Tabang Mindanaw’s Culture of Peace Program in the province of Sulu, and the early childhood education, health and nutrition program in Lantawan, Basilan, in partnership with the Nagdilaab Foundation.*

In New York, Milet speaks before the First U.N. General Assembly Civil Society Hearings on Human Security, about the indigenous peoples in the Philippines.

Milet is awarded the Ozanam Award by Ateneo de Manila University, the premier Jesuit academic institution in the Philippines.

Heavy fighting continues in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago.

Milet begins to coordinate a human security program for Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, under the tutelage of Professor Ernesto D. Garilao, former President Ramos’ agrarian reform secretary and social reform agenda chief.

2006 *Milet holds an informal dialogue with the new commander of Joint Task Force Comet, Brigadier General Ruben Rafael, in Sulu, and presents the Culture of Peace Study in Sulu, by Tabang Mindanaw.*

2007 *May – Milet resigns from Tabang Mindanaw and returns to the region as a volunteer peace and development worker.*

Milet and former colleagues from Tabang Mindanaw brief the Joint Task Force Comet on lessons learned in community organizing in complex areas and the specific challenges of working in Sulu.

Milet volunteers with Caritas Manila and its partners’ network on disaster risk reduction and management.

Milet serves as a resource person and speaks on peace and development in Sulu and Basilan for “Project Brain Gain: Communicating for Peace,” a program of the General Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

2008 July – A Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) – a major step on the way to a Comprehensive Compact to end the conflict – is initialed by both the government and the MILF.

August – The official signing of the MOA-AD in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is halted when a temporary restraining order is issued by the Supreme Court, upon a petition by powerful Christian politicians in Mindanao. Fighting resumes between the MILF and government army, displacing hundreds of thousands.

September – On a short stop in Basilan to conclude a focus group discussion with the leaders of the displaced people in Tipo-tipo, Milet is captured on September 15 by the Abu Sayyaf and held for 61 days.

October – The Supreme Court declares the MOA-AD unconstitutional.

November – Milet is awarded the Peace Weaver Award during the Mindanao Week of Peace.

2009 ***Milet is awarded the Rotary Heroic Citizen Award by Rotary International District 3800.***

A November attack on people traveling to file election nomination papers on Mindanao leaves 57 dead. Victims' relatives blame the rival Ampatuan clan said to be allied to President Arroyo. The government declares a state of emergency in the area to help track down suspects. It is lifted in December.

Milet serves as consultant and acting secretariat head to OPAPP's monitoring committee for the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law.

Milet is awarded a Rotary World Peace Fellowship and completes her professional development certificate in peace and conflict studies from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand.

2010 ***Milet organizes and conducts the ADRRN Consultation-Training Workshop on Disaster Management and Disaster Risk Reduction for Caritas social action partners, in Manila and then in Mindanao.***

Milet takes part in national consultations on the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response.

Milet participates in the Conference on Public Forgiveness, at Nimejen University in the Netherlands.

While continuing to work as a humanitarian volunteer – this time with Caritas Manila –Milet serves as a faculty member in the Asia Leaders Program of the U.N.-mandated University for Peace Graduate School. She also lectures at the Center for International Humanitarian and Development Studies at Miriam College.

June – Benigno Aquino III is inaugurated as the 15th president of the Philippines.

Milet speaks at the U.N. General Assembly Civil Society Hearings on the Millennium Development Goals, on sustaining development and withstanding crises.

Milet travels to the United States to take part in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF
MILET B. MENDOZA

A Nation Wakes

Manila, Luzon, 1983-1986

*"The important thing is not to be a success. The important thing is to be in history, bearing witness."
– Ambassador Howard Dee*

The television was on, that Sunday afternoon in August 1983, as it was whenever the three Mendoza sisters were home between college classes. A news flash interrupted the programming. Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, a former political rival and harsh critic of longtime President Ferdinand Marcos, had been assassinated at the Manila international airport just minutes after his plane arrived from the United States.

Milet was alone in the room she shared with her twin Choy, and her older sister Lai, and was crying without understanding why. All she saw was 10 seconds of blurry footage. All she knew about Aquino was that he was a rival of Marcos and came from an established political family. But his murder rocked her comfortable world. She felt lonely and strangely off balance, as if the floor was tilting under her feet.

Marcos was the only president Milet and her sisters had ever known. They were all babies when he took office, and the country had been under martial law since the twins were 8. With the help of his wife Imelda, Marcos saw to it that his iron fist was publicly perceived as a velvet glove. School textbooks were censored. History was colored and sweetened. For middle class families like the Mendozas, life had the quality of a pleasant dream.

In the days that followed Aquino’s assassination, the government-controlled media blamed the murder on communists – the usual villains in that time and place. There was only one free news outlet: the Catholic radio channel, Radio Veritas, which was unsparing in its critique.

Public discontent grew in the years after Aquino’s death. When Marcos called for snap elections in February 1986, Milet and Choy signed up at the parish church to volunteer with NAMFREL, the National Movement for Free Elections, and monitored the polls in their own district. Even before the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines and the U.S. Congress called the results fraudulent, they knew that Corazon Aquino, the widow of the murdered Ninoy, had really won the election.

By 1986 Milet was a young professional, with a degree in psychology and a position as personnel supervisor at Cityland Development Corporation in Makati City, the premier business district. It was there, in Ugarte Field, after office hours, that she and some of her colleagues would grab yellow flags and join the crowd of demonstrators in a shower of yellow confetti. Yellow, Milet’s favorite color from early childhood, was the color of Aquino’s party. In the offices above, workers were tearing the yellow pages out of dozens of telephone directories and running them through shredders to make streamers. Professionals stood side by side with laborers and the unemployed, calling for Marcos to step down.

On Saturday, February 22, 1986, when Cardinal Jaime Sin of Manila issued a call on Radio Veritas for people to bring food and moral support to the police and military forces who had removed their support from the government, the response was instantaneous. Thousands, then hundreds of thousands, began to stream down Epifanio De Los Santos Avenue (EDSA).

But Milet and her friends were not at EDSA; they were ringing the fence that surrounded the transmitting tower of Radio Veritas, determined to protect the voice of the revolution. The following day, aware that Marcos was sending his loyalist forces to knock down the transmitter, Milet and her colleagues joined the thousands – including her sisters and brothers, parents and neighbors, and briefly her father – in EDSA, smiling because they knew the station had switched to a backup transmitter.

The mood was festive, almost carnival-like, as people shouted out news reports from their transistor radios, sang, prayed and chanted “Co-ry, Co-ry, Co-ry.” They waved flags and passed *pan de sal* from hand to hand. The soldiers who were sent by Marcos to control the crowd received their share of bread as well. It was the miracle of the loaves and fishes before Milet’s eyes: A few people shared a little, and soon there was enough for everyone.

But that wasn’t the only miracle. The next day came the rumor that Marcos’ armed Marines were coming ... and then they were there, advancing on the crowd from two directions. Nuns, seminarians, devout lay people, even children knelt in the road with rosaries around their fingers and prayers on their lips. And the tanks stopped rolling. Not a shot was fired, and not a single person was hurt. There were 2 million Filipinos in EDSA that day. Troops laid down their weapons to link arms with the people.

The demonstrations continued for two more days, until Marcos left the country for Hawaii and Corazon Aquino, in a yellow dress, was proclaimed the 11th president, and first woman president, of the Philippines. Drums pounded, car horns blared, champagne poured, high Masses were said and the celebration went on and on.

Like the rest of the nation, Milet and her family were now wide awake.

Mountain Shoes
Northern Luzon, 1990

“Could one of you gentlemen stop laughing long enough to give me a hand?”

The pitch of the land in the mountainous Cordillera region of northern Luzon is so steep, climbing is a challenge on a dry day. On this particular drizzly day, Milet was face down, involuntarily embracing the earth, grasping for a bush or hand to pull herself up.

Was it the shoes? She had always loved shoes the way she loved order. As a young girl she would line up her slippers beside her bed every night, with their toes pointing out toward a new day. Her job now typically required neat pumps for top-level international meetings or sandals to slip on at a moment’s notice. She told a cousin in San Francisco that she needed different footwear for these highland expeditions, and she had sent along a popular brand of American hiking boots.

A hand was offered, and slowly, with a loud, wet squelch, those boots emerged from the mud. Milet found her footing, exhaled and laughed with relief. In the years since she had joined Cory Aquino’s government in the Office of the Peace Commissioner, her development and peace work had been a constant, conscious process of mastering her fears, including her fear of looking foolish and her dread of chaos.

Milet was in the company of some of her nation’s foremost agricultural experts, serving as their gateway to the local farmers. They had come to teach the new Sloping Agriculture Land Technology, which would control erosion and increase fertility, and she was eager to learn from both science and indigenous farming traditions.

Teaching farmers how to farm: On the face of it, the whole idea was ridiculous. What these indigenous farmers of the Igorot tribe had learned from their parents was what scientists call swidden or, in Tagalog, *kaingin* farming. They would clear and burn a patch of land to enrich the thin mountain soil, grow crops there for a few years, then move on when the soil was exhausted and repeat the process elsewhere. By the time they circled back to the first spot, the seasons would have restored its fertility. This system was eminently sustainable as long as they had a manageable population and a large enough expanse of land. But over the decades, these farmers had seen their range reduced and their population increase as other displaced indigenous people moved upland. Milet’s team of agricultural experts was hoping to introduce new low-cost methods that could produce a livelihood under the changing conditions.

In the following years of highland trekking, visiting indigenous communities, Milet would check to see what kind of shoes the farmers wore: high rubber boots, bright blue with cleated soles. Once, she quietly asked one of the girls how much they cost – 100 pesos, about \$2.00.

In her later work in Mindanao, Milet would remember to provide everyone on her team with a pair of sturdy blue farmer boots.

The Best Valentine's Day Ever
Cotabato, Mindanao, 2001

“The peace of the heart is the heart of peace.”
 – Pope John Paul II

The four prisoners sat silent, impassive, with their wrists cuffed and eyes cast down. Meeting this group from outside – their first visitors in many months – they seemed self-conscious in their worn out prison uniforms. They somehow had managed to stay clean shaven, and the detail moved Milet. But all four were distressingly thin, and one, Leopoldo, had a racking cough.

Milet was visiting four men of the Mantimo family who had been falsely accused of murdering five children in Payong-Payong, part of the village, or *barangay*, of Renibon. She had first heard of their plight through Sister Vebs, a Carmelite of Charity-Verduna, who had come to the Assisi Development Foundation office where Milet headed the civil society coalition *Tabang Mindanaw*, or Help Mindanao. After hearing their story, she wanted to do all she could to get the wheels of justice turning.

Soner Mantimo, his sons Pawad and Domingo, and his brother Leopoldo were Manobo tribespeople – upland farmers who grow corn, rice, coffee, vegetables and fruits, just as their ancestors had done through the generations. But there were tensions on their land, between the Manobo indigenous people and Christian settlers – many of whom supported multinational mining companies eager to exploit the natural resources that lay beneath the soil in Renibon and the greater Cotabato province.

In May 1997, five children of a Christian settler were murdered in Payong-Payong, and though there were no witnesses and few clues, their father blamed the Manobo tribe. More than a year after the crime, in June 1998, councilor Norberto Peñalosa brought three Manobo men to the local office of the National Bureau of Investigation for questioning. They initially implicated the four Mantimo men, but two months later retracted their statements, claiming Peñalosa had threatened their lives if they did not accuse the Mantimos.

The Mantimos weren't aware they were suspect until November, when they were called to appear before the provincial governor. They went voluntarily, eager to clear their good names. Instead, they were hurried off to jail and arraigned on multiple murder charges.

“This feels like the place of the living dead,” Milet said to Father Peter Geremiah as they left the barbed wire and security gates behind. The Italian missionary, a passionate advocate for indigenous peoples, had accompanied her to the jail to visit the Mantimos. They saw that the prisoners were fed poorly and denied medical care. Soner had kidney disease, while the others developed tuberculosis in the overcrowded provincial jail. The prison was far from their highland home, so their wives and children couldn't afford to visit them. As the men languished in jail for years, the Mantimo women had to manage the crops and *carabao* on their own, hoping to make enough money to feed their families and send their older children to school. There was nothing left over for hiring a lawyer.

Sister Vebs introduced Milet to another Manobo, Melinda Ducay, a distant relative of the Mantimos who was committed to securing their release. Together, they managed to find a competent lawyer and negotiate a fair fee. Milet went to the Office of the Prosecutor, found the archive where poor people's legal records were allowed to molder and learned all she could about the multiple players in the case and their lines of influence. Following the leads Milet provided, the lawyer found new evidence and witnesses who could verify that the Mantimo men had been far from where the crime occurred. A new judge was soon sworn in, more independent than the previous one. While she carried on other activities across Mindanao for the Tabang coalition, Milet received full reports from Melinda, the sisters and the lawyer before and after each hearing. At last, the case was moving forward.

She was in Sulu, southern Mindanao, on February 14, 2004 – nearly three years after she first became involved in the case and over five years after the Mantimos were jailed – when she received a text message from Sister Vebs: “The Mantimos are free! I can hardly believe it. The court just issued a verdict of NOT GUILTY, and the men have been released.”

The Mantimo men, Sister Vebs reported, were so eager to go home they flagged down a public bus and climbed aboard, still wearing the orange jumpsuits with a P, for prisoner, on their backs – but with freedom papers firmly in hand.

There were no newspaper stories announcing the event. Outside of Renibon, only a few people knew it happened. But for Tabang Mindanaw, this was the beginning of its Free the Indigenous Peoples Program, which would draw attention to the hundreds of other indigenous people in Mindanao who were jailed for challenging the vested interests of powerful people.

And for Milet, it was the best Valentine's Day ever.

Shaking Things Up
Tawi-Tawi, 2001-2007

“There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.”
 – A.J. Muste

Milet paused at the whiteboard for comments. Fresh from a program at the well-regarded Asian Institute of Management, where professors at the world’s top business schools offered the latest technical tools, she had just made a presentation to Tabang partners, a group of priests, their bishop and other key stakeholders. She was eager to share her new knowledge of objectives, indicators and deliverables.

A short, slightly built, middle-aged priest was the first to speak. He had tired eyes under a high forehead, and he wore the white cassock, wide black belt and oversized crucifix of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. After four years among the wind, water and warriors of Tabawan on the island of Tawi-Tawi, Father Rey Roda was not impressed by diagrams.

“What if the boat can’t leave the dock, Milet? What happens to your targets and indicators then?”

Who is this cynical guy? she thought.

Who is this green girl out of Manila, with all her nice abstract theory? he wondered.



One of the first times Milet visited Father Rey on Tawi-Tawi, he sent a young man to accompany her and her colleague Sister Alice on the ride from Bongao, the provincial capital, to Tabawan. They had just settled themselves and their packages – bananas, eggplant, tomatoes, greens, chicken, all the things Father Rey loved to eat – for the eight-hour crossing when the young man began to pick it all up.

“What are you doing?” Milet asked.

“We’re not going on this boat. We need to get off now. We’ll take the one tomorrow morning instead.”

“Why on earth not?”

“Just come with me and I’ll explain it to you later.”

The young man was adamant, so Milet and Sister Alice followed him and their belongings down the gangplank and into the street above the wharf.

“Now, what was all that?” Milet asked.

“The captain came and told me he overheard a group of men planning to assault the two of you when the boat was underway.” Milet had heard of the sea pirates who ply the waters; even the large commercial boats had armed security guards. “The captain asked me to please take you off the boat.”

What happens to your targets and indicators then? Milet remembered.



Tabawan is one of 450 islands that make up the province of Tawi-Tawi. It holds Notre Dame of Tabawan High School, where Father Rey was director, with classrooms for more than 300 students, playing fields, a library, a generator-powered computer lab, a health center, a small chapel and mosque, his private quarters and a huge cistern for collecting rainwater.

A plastic banner on one of the cement structures says MUNICIPAL BUILDING, but no one goes there. The mayor of Tabawan hardly ever visits. The city council doesn’t meet. Neither do the health or education committees, which exist largely on paper. Only one family in ten has access to clean water. People are dependent on rainwater. Nearly everyone has had malaria. There are paved paths for walking and cycling in some areas, but no roads wide enough for a car. The family car is a boat. There is no post office, jail, public library, hospital, theater or bank. The few privately owned cement buildings – maybe 30 or so – are the homes of the more established families. They are built around the edges of the island and connected to the rickety, swaying, much-mended and often broken network of wooden walkways that link the more than 1,000 one-room stilt houses. These houses – open to the elements except for shutters in the front – are where most citizens of Tabawan live, along with the thousands of refugees who move between Sabah, Malaysia and the Sulu archipelago.¹⁰



One day Father Rey called Milet in genuine perplexity. She was launching a new initiative by Tabang Mindanaw called *Pagtabangan BaSulTa*, or Helping Each Other Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi. It would move beyond relief work to challenge injustice – from the local level to the national.

“Milet,” Father Rey began, “the people here are poor. They may only eat once a day, but they seem content. We know their leaders are corrupt and they do too, but they accept it. Are we going to disrupt their lives because we know they deserve better? Do we really want to shake everything up for them?”

Milet offered no opinions; she only listened. She knew how much Father Rey loved the people he served. He insisted that all his students meet high standards for both English and computer skills. This was their only way out: better education for a decent livelihood, so they could send money back home once they got off the island. He and Milet always hoped that enough of the successful students would return to become leaders in their community, keep the school running and advocate for more just conditions. He mentored former students through their college years, sending encouraging calls and letters, and money for food. The school’s math teacher was a former graduate, so inch by inch he seemed to be gaining ground.

Milet waited patiently on the other end of the phone as he deliberated his own question. “Yes,” he announced after a long pause. “Yes, let’s do it!”



Over time, in spite of their initial differences, Milet the humanitarian and peace worker and Father Rey the priest had come to respect each other greatly. He showed her what it meant to live among the people and ground development initiatives in the community’s own wisdom. Milet in turn learned to push back against donors’ often unrealistic expectations and to advocate for the people without compromising their dignity.

In 2007, after building 60 new stilt houses and a small day care center for the refugees from Sabah, Father Rey and the other community leaders organized themselves into Voices of Tabawan and took on the repair of the public elementary school. As always, they insisted on plenty of sweat equity so the school wouldn’t be sheltering goats in a few years like many of the outsider-initiated public infrastructure Milet had seen elsewhere. Because salt weakens cement, children rinsed sand with water their families had donated from their own small allotments. Mothers cooked for the carpenters or took turns mixing cement with the rinsed sand.

Working together, they replaced the school roof, reinforced its teetering supports, rehabilitated seven classrooms and fitted them with desks, blackboards and supplies. The teachers paid from their own pockets to have a talented local artist paint a sunny mural in each room.

On the day of the dedication, the school principal – the one who everyone knew routinely stole the rice the government provided for the malnourished first-graders – showed up and bowed graciously, happy to take credit for the community’s efforts.

Later, chatting on Father Rey’s balcony after dinner, Milet was indignant.

“How can the people stand for this kind of government? Have you heard the joke? They say Zamboanga City has more than one mayor. Our absentee municipal mayors from the Sulu archipelago are all hanging out there in air-conditioned comfort in their luxurious homes, restaurants, the shopping malls and hotels. It’s not a joke, Father Rey!”

“We’re building peace, Milet. At least we know what we have to do.”

“Yes, but it’s like walking on broken glass. It feels like it’s all reversed: I’ve become the more serious and cynical one.”

“Do you know why?” Father Rey was laughing. “It is because you are in love with the poor now and you feel with them, you feel their deprivation. It’s all personal for you now, isn’t it? Welcome to the club.”

Four Days in June
Sulu, 2007

“Development is the new name for peace.”
– Pope Paul VI

When a new commander, Major General Ruben Rafael, was assigned to the army base in Jolo, the capital of Sulu, Milet scheduled an appointment and went to pay him a call.

After initial pleasantries, she asked the general, “May I kindly share with you the work Tabang Mindanaw is doing here in Sulu?”

Though she was no longer working for Tabang, Milet stayed on in the archipelago as an independent humanitarian. Peacebuilding was her life, not just her job. She was continuing to facilitate dialogue for her old friends in the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), arranging meetings with local leaders and people. Earlier that year, OPAPP had agreed to fund an unprecedented consultation among the communities on what human security meant to them. Several different NGOs were working on the consultation across the 18 municipalities of Sulu. The Tabang team adopted a non-traditional approach. They asked the people: “What are the questions *you* want to ask yourselves about sustainable peace and development?”

Meanwhile, the military was continuing to engage with the Abu Sayyaf militant group, associated with the Jemaah Islamiya terrorist group, and the armed groups who had broken away from the Moro National Liberation Front. As always, the people in the communities were the most affected. General Rafael had asked her to persuade those who fled their homes during the latest round of bombing to leave the evacuation centers and go back. She tried to help him understand the people’s perspective.

“Most likely they’re still expecting the bombers to come back. Or maybe they’re just so tired of moving they can’t do it again. I’ve been surveying these families, asking what they remember and what they see ahead. Do you know that, on average, the people in Indanan have been displaced 10 times already?”

Aware of the military’s framework on “clear, hold, consolidate and develop,” Milet was relentless. “Has it occurred to you that perhaps you’re beginning at the wrong end? The people have to make the choice and make it happen. Especially in communities beset by violence – and I know it’s coming from all sides – people need more than anything to experience their own goodness and the goodness of their neighbors.”



On the morning of June 3, 2007, Milet was taking a break from peace consultations to visit Barangay Marsada in Panglima Estino, where the residents of neighboring Kulay-Kulay had taken refuge from conflict. This area was home to the Tausugs, a proud and dominant Muslim tribe, as well as the lower-status, seafaring Badjaos. Both were caught between the government military and armed rebel groups on their island.

Milet had trained some of the mothers from the community, who were now volunteer coordinators. Each coordinator had a notebook in which she recorded the names of the families, including the ages of each family member, she was responsible for and the aid they received. The coordinators showed their neighbors how to prepare porridge and other items in the menus Milet had developed, which were based on their traditional local diet but incorporated low-cost, high-protein, vitamin-enhanced supplements. Then they could teach others, and more children could keep their bright eyes and straight bones. *Loaves and fishes*, Milet thought to herself. *Loaves and fishes*.

Today's task was to meet with these women partners, find out if the mothers in Marsada would need another 10 days of supplemental feeding for their children and elders, and distribute a few small toys for the children. But the mothers were not in Marsada. They had gone back to Kulay-Kulay to tend their farms. So Milet set out to meet with them there and assess damage to their homes. The barangay captain's wife, six young men, four boys and a teenage girl all joined Milet. Her 10-year old aide-de-camp walked beside her, basking in the honor of having been entrusted with the two-way radio that kept her in touch with "base camp" in Panglima Estino, her adoptive Islamic community.

Before Milet and her party boarded the open jeepney for Kulay-Kulay, she texted two Tabang Mindanaw colleagues and General Rafael about her plans. The general told her that the local Marine commanding officer would be there to welcome her.

After only a few minutes of walking and taking photos of the damaged homes, she heard a rough voice commanding her and the others to halt. Looking up, she saw a young man lounging on the veranda of the only sound structure in the area. He was bare-chested, and looked weary and angry. Though his tone suggested authority, there was nothing military about his demeanor or his loose, light-colored pajama pants.

Milet was annoyed but not particularly surprised. Like the community, she had grown almost accustomed to the military presence in their midst. The group stopped when three out-of-uniform Marines stood in their way. She extended her hand in *Salam*, the customary greeting of peace, and introduced herself and the others.

"Do you want to be kidnapped by Abu Sayyaf?" the first Marine shouted.

"Where is your commanding officer? I am a humanitarian checking on the feeding program for the displaced families from this area. General Rafael asked me to come here. He told me he just visited Kulay-Kulay, and the area had been cleared. He asked me to help convince people to return home."

"*Walang general-general sa amin? Who cares about the general?*" replied the Marine sergeant.

Ignoring his outburst, Milet went on to explain that she wanted to find out why the displaced townspeople refused to return despite the military's instructions to go home.

"*Kasalanan ng pagoy yan!*" the sergeant said vehemently. "It is the fault of the evacuees!"

He then turned to Mibahar, Milet's young Tausug companion, and lifted him by the collar of his shirt. Holding him above the ground, the sergeant demanded to see his identification.

Almost instinctively, Milet lunged forward to put herself between them, but the Marine would not budge. She trained her camera on the scene, hoping to distract him. The sergeant dropped the young man and gave him a rough shove. Mibahar ran, calling to the other boys to follow him. The young men took off in three directions while the two Tausug women, Sherna and Buday, dropped to the ground. They were terrified and wanted to run too, but they wouldn't leave Milet behind.

One of the soldiers held Milet while the other seized her camera, hitting her forehead with it in the process. Almost before she could register the pain in her head she felt a different pain in her right arm. Sherna, the wife of the barangay captain, was pulling at it with the full force of terror.

“Ma’am, ma’am, let’s go! Please! Please!”

Milet still tried to reason with the soldiers. “Please give me my camera and calm down. You have no authority over any of us. We have not done anything illegal.”

Sherna kept tugging. Milet remembered what General Rafael had told her the first time they met in the camp: “Do not run away from the military.”

She turned to Sherna and touched the woman's face in loving reassurance. “It's going to be OK.”

But Sherna was adamant. “We need to run. Take off your shoes!”

“Take off my shoes?”

Milet seldom let go of her shoes or her composure. Her feet rooted themselves instinctively. When she saw that Buday was too terrified even to scream, Milet felt the weight of her responsibility for this group. *In situations like this, you cannot just think about yourself*, an inner voice spoke to her. Before she knew it she was taking to her heels, sandals in one hand, the other clasped between Sherna's and Buday's.

The three ran for what seemed like hours through the thick mud and the late afternoon heat, past coconut trees, struggling to find their way back to Marsada. Several times they thought they heard footsteps behind them, but no one appeared.

Even as her legs pumped and her feet kept striking the ground, Milet had a momentary sensation of viewing the scene from above. She heard the inner voice again, *This is what it is like to be one of them*.

Before this day she had taken pains to learn about the history of continuous displacement experienced by the Tausug people. She had even shared it with others, back in Manila and at

conferences around the world. But now she *felt* that history in her own heaving chest. Her heartbeat pulsated with theirs, and she belonged to these people as she never had before.

“*Ate, Ate*,¹¹ let’s stop. I’ll die if I have to go any further,” begged young Buday.

“Yes, let’s find a place to hide here,” Milet suggested as she slumped to the ground. Though no hiding place was apparent in the middle of this forlorn coconut field, the thought of a rest was delectable.

“No, we will not rest! We have to run!” Sherna insisted. Her fear of the soldiers was more powerful than her fatigue. Warily, Milet commanded her legs to rise. Just then they heard a whistle, which Sherna recognized and answered. The Tausugs had a system of whistles that had served them for centuries. Soon Mibahar’s older brother appeared beside them. Milet was moved that he had been following them despite the risk to himself.

“I couldn’t leave you alone, ma’am,” he explained. “I needed to make sure you’re OK.”

“Where are the boys?” Milet asked him. “I’ve been worried about them. Do you suppose they are safe?”

“They ran in two different directions. Don’t worry, they know this area and I’m sure ...”

Sherna and Buday put on a last burst of speed and disappeared before the young man finished speaking. Milet allowed him to hold her arm and almost drag her for the last stretch.

By the time they reached Marsada the whole community was gathered outside and rushed to meet them. The elders apologized on behalf of the community, ashamed that she, an outsider, had been reduced to sharing their lot. Milet was outwardly calm, but inside she felt a deep, burning frustration. *If something like this could happen to me*, she thought – *a humanitarian, a Christian like that sergeant – how much worse it has truly been for these people.*

Milet found a quiet hut and called her colleague in Manila. He alerted General Rafael about the incident, and minutes later the general called her. At a safe distance from the people, she let herself rage and cry.

“General, we were working on a peace and humanitarian mission. What kind of message does this send to the people? I have offered myself to bridge this widening gap.”

To his credit, General Rafael understood that the situation was grave. He apologized and promised to come the next day to meet Milet in Panglima Estino and settle the situation.

She already knew how the community was reacting. She had put herself under their protection, and this was an assault on their fierce Tausug pride. Later she heard rumors that the men in her adoptive village were ready to attack. Even her most loyal staff member, usually calm and reflective, was talking about revenge. “If this happens again, I will go to the mountains and take heads,” he told her.

That night, she sat down alone and in silence. She prayed for a way to turn this incident into something positive.



She spent the next morning developing her documentation and preparing the community for dialogue. She gathered the children who had gone with her to Kulay-Kulay and asked them to describe what had happened. After piecing their accounts together, Milet knew that the soldiers had not in fact pursued them. They had been running from ghosts – the ghosts of a history of chronic violence, hatred and vengeance. But to the children their pursuers were real. They even reported hearing gunshots in their direction, though none had been fired.



The following morning Milet met with nine men in uniform, including the three Marines, the general and a colonel, the general's deputy. The Marine broke down as he made his apology to Milet, trembling with fear of losing his post and not being able to support his family. "I didn't know you were a 'big' person," he explained to an almost-amused Milet, seated next to the top general in Sulu. He and the other soldiers expressed their view of the conflict and their resentments against the Muslim rebels. Each point of view, each truth, was respectfully heard and acknowledged.

When it was time for her to speak, Milet narrated the history of the region from the Moro and indigenous perspectives, this time with a heightened, more personal dimension. "Sergeant, if you and I were born on this side of this world, you would be that young man you collared, and I would be that frantic woman on the ground who dragged me away. I am a Christian, and I forgive you. But for the Muslim people you have offended, it is a question of social justice. You must ask for their forgiveness as well, not just mine. And please, remember the many years of violence and deprivation these people have endured, and what the uniform you are wearing means to them."



Milet left early the next day with her Tabang team to prepare the leaders of Marsada for their dialogue with the military. She sat down with Munib, the mayor of Panglima Estino, to explain what was going to happen, while the women of the community set out soft drinks and prepared to receive guests.

At the appointed time, the tanks rolled into the village, loaded with officers and men in full uniform – and promptly got stuck in the mud. The Tausugs were awed when the Marines dismounted and approached them on the ground. It was an auspicious beginning to the meeting.

Milet stage-managed the production, making sure everything would be translated so the common *tao*, or community, would understand. After official greetings had been exchanged, she asked a question. "General, can you please explain to the Muslim people what the military's role is here in Sulu?"

His brief, simple response – “We are the protectors of the people” – may have been as much of a surprise to the Marines as it was to the community.

General Rafael apologized fully, formally and humbly to the mayor and the entire group for his failure in the discipline of his forces. For the first time, the townspeople saw their mayor moved to tears. “Never in the history of the Tausug people have we heard a military general apologizing to us,” said Munib Estino.

Every person in the group who had been involved in the incident received a personal apology. The community’s dialogue with the military climaxed with the Marines embracing the young boys and men who were Milet’s companions to Kulay-Kulay.

Then the general explained how they would take the apology to the next step. The Marines would help to repair the damaged homes.



On June 23, by special invitation of General Rafael, Milet and her colleagues Vic and Bong made a full-day presentation to the commanding officers from various units of the Armed Forces of the Philippines all over Sulu. They addressed a star-studded assembly of more than 40 officials, including full colonels from the Army, Marines and Air Force, inviting them to understand the longstanding conflict from new points of view. They introduced them to the internationally recognized principles for civil-military operations and an alternative vision of development and peace: human security.

The apology, the rebuilding and the opportunity for community organizers to tutor the top brass of the Philippine forces were all unprecedented in Sulu history. Milet felt hopeful that this new positive story could begin to offset the war chest of grievances in the Tausug community’s long memory. With the help of General Rafael, who brought humility and flexibility to the rigid military culture, ground had been gained for peace. A new jewel was shining in Milet’s treasure chest of goodness.

In the Valley of the Shadow of DeathBasilan, 2008

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
– Psalm 23*

You only have to take the next step, Milet told herself. I don't know how long we've been walking or how far we still have to go, but I can take one more step. Maybe then we'll reach our final destination.

At first the seven heavily armed men said they were taking them to the mayor, and Milet assumed everything would be straightened out there and they would soon be free. Before long, though, they dragged her and four others into a forested area and took away their identification, their watches, their cell phones and cameras, even Milet's earrings and rosary.

The men kept calling them trespassers and "Melikans," for Americans, and shouting about them being with the Red Cross, though the team's identification clearly stated who they were and what they were about. Milet thought of who knew her whereabouts today and which friendly local officials they would be able to appeal to. She and her colleagues had made good friends on the island of Basilan, and many of them were anxiously waiting for them right now. She was sure the news of their kidnapping would spread quickly.

Their captors told them proudly that they were *mujahedeen* of Abu Sayyaf, reputed to be the most ruthless and extreme of the Islamic militant groups in Mindanao.

As it began raining, they all took shelter under a tree. Milet began trying to clean herself up. "What are you doing?" her colleague Espie asked.

"Oh, OK." Milet understood. She dipped two fingers in the mud and applied new streaks to her forehead, chin and cheeks. She wanted to be clean, but the last thing either of them wanted was to look attractive.

They released three of the five after nine hours, leaving them to find their own way back to a road. Milet had prayed for their two male drivers to be released, certain they would be beheaded.

"I only wanted to keep one of you, but it would be a pity," one of the abductors whispered to Milet in a suggestive tone.

Espie and Milet were forced to walk up and down hills, across a stream, through fields and forests. *One more step*, Milet kept telling herself. Under her breath she recited her favorite psalm: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for the Lord is with me."

Finally, just before midnight on the 25th of September – nearly 12 hours after they were first ambushed – they came to the first safe house. It was a small, one-room *nipa* hut with bamboo walls and a thatched roof. At last, they were allowed to rest.



“I’m sorry, Espie. I can guess a few of the letters, but I’m not really getting it. I think we’ll be OK if we sit close like this and whisper.”

It was early in the morning on the second day of their captivity. Espie was using her forefinger to write words on Milet’s arm. Espie and her daughter Angel made a game of communicating that way in places where they were expected to be quiet, and she was sure she could use the same system here. But Milet was frustrated, and so was Espie. They were also cold, frightened, exhausted and sore from trying to sleep on the hard wooden bed in this dank, tiny room.

Underneath it all, though, was a small spark of gratitude. In the early years of her work in Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, Milet had formulated practical security tips for her colleagues in the *Pagtabangan* development network. She was careful to take reasonable precautions, like making sure someone always knew where she was. She had good friends among the military and the Muslim local officials, as well as outside the region, and she trusted in the power of their protection. Still, she knew she was working in a high-risk area. More than once it had crossed her mind that if she was ever kidnapped, she’d like to be with her dependable Esperancita. The two women shared the same passion for peace and human rights. Espie had grown up here in Basilan, amidst the Yakan people.

“Espie, I’m glad ... I’m sorry ...”

“Hush! Someone’s here,” Espie hissed.

A ray of weak light revealed a worried woman carrying a small flashlight, a thermos of hot water, two small packages of Milo chocolate drink to mix with the water, two cups and a plate of what looked like boiled sweet potatoes. It was the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims eat breakfast before sunrise so they have strength to fast until the sun goes down.

Espie thanked the woman and asked her a few questions, which she answered in a whisper that matched their own. The men were still sleeping, and she had no more wish to wake them than Milet and Espie did.

“Does she know when they’re going to let us go?”

“If she knows anything, she isn’t telling. She says she’s ‘just a woman.’ I think she has a kind heart, though.”

The woman later brought them a plate of rice and one small and very salty fried fish. Milet asked Espie which part of the fish she wanted.

“What did she say?” Milet whispered to Espie after the woman had gone out.

“She said these are really bad guys and she does not agree with what they are doing. She’s not from around here herself, and she’s worried about us.”

They were just settling down to try to sleep before sunset when Milet heard her name called. It seemed they were no longer speaking with Espie as much. Milet was getting more nervous. She slipped a scarf over her hair and went out to see four men, two she recognized and two she had not seen before. Like the others, they were bearded and dressed in camouflage army uniforms.

“Our commander wants you to come with us,” said the younger of the two new men.

“Espie, dear. We have to walk again.”

After another long and arduous night walk, their captors stopped. This house was a little larger than the one before. It was set up on sticks, like most of the houses in the region – not tall stilts, like the houses in Tabawan, but supports that left a space under the floor. Slatted bamboo flooring a few inches above the dirt made a relatively dry storage space, and chickens and goats took shelter there when it rained. The men pushed them into this basement space.

“Stay here. And don’t make a sound!” One of the men kept his gun trained on them as he backed away. After the others left, their new guard allowed them to clean up in the crude bathroom – a hose connected to a stream to provide running water – outside the kitchen.

“Keep your heads down!” the guard warned. “We do not want the neighbors to see you.”

“Water!” Milet exclaimed. She and Espie both rinsed their mud-caked feet, the prospect of a bath sheer leisure.

In the afternoon one of the men came into the room and peppered them with questions. Milet pretended to be sick, as she had when the guard who spoke some Tagalog asked her personal questions on the long walk yesterday evening. Espie gave short answers, trying to avoid rousing their anger without giving away any information that could make things worse.

Weary as she was, Milet couldn’t still her mind enough to sleep. There was a kind of bed they could share, with old pillows and a blanket. The space was high enough for them to sit up, and she could hear the men’s voices in the room directly above her head. She listened intently, hoping she could learn something about their plans.

Before long the voices settled into a rhythmic, repeating pattern.

Allahu Akbar.

Allah is the greatest.

Allahu Akbar.

Allah is the greatest.

Ash hadu an la ilaha illal lah.

I bear witness that there is no deity but Allah.

Ash hadu an la ilaha illal lah.

I bear witness that there is no deity but Allah.

Ash hadu an-na Muhammadar rasulul lah.

I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.

Ash hadu an-na Muhammadar rasulul lah.

I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.

The men prayed five times a day, and Milet always prayed along silently in her own words. This house, she learned later, belonged to an ustadz, a religious leader who was also a commander in the Moro National Liberation Front. His voice had more intensity and a different, more musical cadence than the others’.

Here, as in the first house, a kind woman brought them food. Her head and face were covered by a *hijab* and a long, loose, black *jubah* covered her body. She was the ustadz’ wife, and seemed less frightened than the older woman at the first house. Espie talked to her and then told Milet, “She said she will try to get us some water, toothbrushes, soap, sanitary napkins and clean clothes.”

The next evening, again just as they were settling down for the night, Milet heard her name called. This time, she soon learned, Espie was to stay and she was to go away alone. It was to be as Milet had anticipated. Earlier in the day, Milet had whispered to her friend, “We will be separated soon.”

Milet implored her guard. “You are supposed to take care of me. Why are you letting them take me away?”

“There is nothing I can do. I must obey my commander.”

Tearfully, the women divided their few possessions. Milet kept the bar of soap and her plastic water bottle. The clothes she had washed yesterday were still wet, and she needed socks to protect her feet on the hike.

“Here, take mine! But hurry!” The Abu Sayyaf guard handed over his own worn-out extra pair.

Milet wanted the moment to be frozen in time. She did not want to leave Espie and face the darkness alone, but she knew the choice was not hers. The two women clung together in a long, tight embrace, delaying the departure until the men insisted on leaving.

“I will negotiate for both of us, Espie, when I see the commander. Please promise me that if you get out first you will ask my parents’ forgiveness on my behalf. Let them know how sorry I am for the anguish I brought upon them. Please tell them I love them.”

“God will be with you, Milet,” Espie whispered.

The ustadz, his wife and Espie gathered around Milet as she thanked each one of them. The wife wrapped her scarf over Milet’s head to keep her covered and warm.

Milet stepped out alone to join the two young Abu Sayyaf who would escort her across the mountains to the commander's house. It was her third night of walking in the pitch black forest with the armed men. So as not to panic, she focused on her feet and, taking deep breaths, uttered "Hail Mary, full of grace"



"Talk to your friend now! Tell him they have until Friday to meet our terms. We have killed others, and we will kill you without a thought."

After Milet was taken to Commander Mike's bungalow, in the second month of her captivity, when he was at home she spoke only with him. This was a cement building, larger than the others, with two floors and a long deck. It appeared to be something of a command center, at least for the time being.

There were no women here except his 21-year-old second wife – until she took advantage of a trip to the market to run away. Then the first wife came back and Milet got the hijab, pajamas and towel the other left behind. A woman neighbor, a wife of an Abu Sayyaf, provided food for Milet and the many men who came and went from the house, out of rations the commander controlled. Sometimes they ran out while he was away, and there was only tea.

Her quarters were at one end of the single room on the first floor. The commander took charge of nailing boards across the window in that section to block out the light. A long plastic curtain separated her from the rest of the room. Sometimes he would push through the curtain accompanied by the young aide he trusted most, the one he had sent to take her from the last safe house and bring her there on the motorcycle, but the aide seldom spoke.

At first, when the commander came to see her, she hoped he would have news of her release. Now those hopes had been lifted and dashed too many times. She knew he was manipulating her and the people who conducted the negotiations for his own ends. Still, she was used to bringing out the best in powerful men, from her father to the bishops, generals, warrior leaders, cabinet officials and executives she dealt with in her work. Even when he threatened and blustered, she trusted him more than she trusted any of the guards. He never struck her, while several of them had. But it was psychological torture he was most adept at. Once he even said his prayers in her part of the room, and she said her own Christian prayers alongside him. He had the power to free her, as well as the power to improve the conditions of her captivity. He never saw her hysterical, and he seldom saw her cry. As he was her captor, he was also her protector. Milet understood that, and held onto it.



Just once, at the beginning of the second month, Milet was allowed to take a bath. She was proud of how well she managed to stay clean with only a piece of soap and two liters of water she would sneak out of the kitchen when everyone was away. She felt she was maintaining her dignity, and it helped her to hold her head high, even when the men hit her or shouted at her for being

uncooperative. She knew how much the Muslims valued cleanliness and she had no wish to justify their concept of Christians like herself as *haram*, unclean.

That one time, close to midnight, as she stood inside a plastic sheet on a small concrete platform in her clothes and poured cold water over her body from a hose, the guards kept their distance. It was the most refreshing, most delightful bath she could have imagined. She was grateful to God.



Milet spent time every day writing letters to Espie.

Be brave, my dear Espie, keep faith. We will be home soon, you with your husband and your sweet children. I pray for you to survive this ordeal even harder than I pray for myself. Kiss your family for me when you get out.

I think of you and pray for you constantly. I hope you've been able to get all the things you need. I asked them to send you some of my things, but they assured me you had everything you needed. They told me not to worry about you. Please take good care of yourself and make it home safely. I miss you, Espie. Our last goodbye embrace keeps me warm.

Milet had no way of knowing if any of them would reach her, but as long as she had paper she would continue to write letters and give them to the guards who seemed to move back and forth between these temporary safe houses. She knew the commander would read them, and she wanted him to.

After she folded the letters she said the rosary on her fingers. The mysteries from the life of Jesus and his mother Mary meant more to her now than they ever had before. She was so thankful she had been taught to pray the rosary, and that she would sometimes lead the prayer at the family altar.

When the neighbor brought her food, Milet would try to get her to stay and talk. It would pass the time, and she might learn something about what the men were planning.

“Will you sit with me for a while?”

“No, I’m sorry, I can’t. My husband may be back soon.”

Milet ate her meal of instant noodles and salty fish as slowly as she could, letting each tiny piece linger on her tongue. This was the only time she would not feel depressed. The act of eating was a distraction she looked forward to. Otherwise, she watched the black ants scurrying on the floor and the spiders crawling up the wall, toward the sunlight she could sense but barely see. She sang all the songs she could remember – a few more than she had been able to remember the day before. She cried very quietly, for just a little while. She walked some more, across the small space from corner to corner, then over and back the other way. And then, finally, it was dark. Slowly, she fell asleep.



The bamboo-sided, palm-thatched nipa huts where Milet stayed during the first month were all houses that families had abandoned as they fled the conflict raging in the region. The commander's house was the center of a small community of about a dozen Abu Sayyaf families. It was divided into cells like a military unit. Sometimes, when he was out, Milet would have visitors, women who had empathy with her. She found crumbs of kindness in her darkest moments, as threats and intimidation alternated with these conversations that were almost normal.

Her guards were usually as bored as she was, and their wives even more so – far from their families and with little prospect of change from day to day. When they would visit, Milet was welcoming, grateful for human contact and eager to understand how they saw her and themselves.

“You live in Manila? Aren't you afraid there? I see it on TV. People knock you down and take your cell phone!”



“When you go back, will you tell your soldiers not to bomb us? Tell them to stay away from Basilan. I am afraid for my baby daughter!”



“Yes, I still dream of going to school. I went for a while when I was young. This life doesn't suit me; I hate it every time I have to go out on patrol. But I've been with Abu Sayyaf most of my life, and I'll die Abu Sayyaf. I don't have any other choice.”



Yang, the shy 16-year-old girl who worried about how Milet fared in Manila, was astonished, at first, when she turned the proposition around.

“What about Basilan? I was never hurt in Manila. Do you think being kidnapped at gunpoint and held against your will might be scary?”

“Oh. I guess you're right. I never thought of it that way.” The light dawned slowly. For her, kidnapping was just the family business.

Once, because Milet missed the sun and stars so much, she asked Yang to describe the sky for her. Even on her night walks she had no chance to look up and see it. She listened, rapt, to the teenager's word pictures, begging her to add more and more detail about the phase of the moon and the glittering stars.

The woman – whom Milet called her Mary – who came with her 6-month-old baby girl to plead for the soldiers to spare them seemed more mature than most of the wives of the compound. In her years of relief work, Milet had seen death and displacement, and she knew the woman's fears

were real. She marveled, though, at how closely this mother’s fear of the national army matched her own fear of Abu Sayyaf and all the other extremist groups in the region.

“We are sisters,” Milet told her. “We’re both in danger. Let’s do everything we can to protect each other.”

One day, the young guard reached his hand through a hole in her cell wall with two pieces of hard candy. Milet was overjoyed. Since the house had no cell phone reception, her captors often came after dark and marched her for hours up a hill where there was a weak signal. There, they would hand her one of her phones, in speaker mode, and ask her to call someone and plead for her life. The calls seemed to lead nowhere. The walks were grueling, and she often felt nauseated and weak. Gratefully, she hid the candies so she could take them along on the next night walk.

Now he checked to be sure that no one else was around, then entered quickly and sat on the floor near the wall. He reminded Milet of some of the boys at Father Rey’s school, before they had settled into the routine of work and study. He was jumpy, alert, obviously bright but still not comfortable in his own skin. Milet was surprised to see tears on his face.

“I’m tired,” he told her. “I miss my mother. I have a migraine every time I hear gunfire.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m 18 this month.”

“Why did you go with the Abu Sayyaf?”

“They feed you. They give you a gun so you can feel powerful. I was only 9, in third grade. My father had no work; there was nothing to do in my village.”

“I see you have prayer beads. I had some too, what we call a rosary, until they were taken away. Will you pray for me, so I can go home to my family? I will say the same prayer for you.”

He could be learning how to bring fresh water to this region, Milet thought. He could be preparing to study medicine or become a teacher. The worst sin of all, in this cycle of violence and retaliation, is the waste of human potential. All of us could be building the future together. We could be filling a common treasure chest of gratitude, stories of love and hope. Instead, we are filling the war chest with injuries and the cry for revenge.



“Why are you protecting these people? Why don’t you think of yourself first?”

Commander Mike was beside himself with frustration. The two mobile phones Milet was carrying were loaded with personal contacts, but she had managed to lock the information so they couldn’t reach her numbers. She was punished harshly for this. No matter how much he threatened, they were able to make only two contacts, and both of those had gone dead after the first call.

What a foolish, stubborn woman, the commander thought. Clearly, these people do not know who they're dealing with. It's time to show them we mean business.



Milet wanted to gain her freedom, but she did not want her family or friends to be tormented further. She could only imagine how much her mother and father had suffered already since learning she had been captured.

There was a small window in the 4-foot-square space where she was confined. It had been boarded over, like the window in the house before, but a narrow opening between the boards admitted a slant of light. Each morning she would wake before the sun and wait for the first rays of dawn. She would open her eyes, then close them again as she felt its glorious warmth touching her face. As the sun rose inch by inch and the light grew stronger, she felt her heart overflow with thanksgiving. Even when she had been racked by nightmares or too frightened to sleep, these first few minutes of her days in captivity felt like the embrace of loving arms. The memory carried her through the rest of the long days, as she wheedled her captors for water to stay clean, sang hymns and love songs, said Hail Marys inside her head or watched the black ants, spiders and tiny *tuko*, or lizards, go about their business.

It was always dark when the *mujahedeen* came in their boots and army camouflage to take her out of her cell. She had been moved four times already, so when two of them came that Friday night, she thought they would be taking her to a new safe house. She prepared her cramped muscles for another long, rocky walk in the dark.

But this time was different. These young men seemed angry and impatient. They wouldn't even let her take the few possessions that went with her everywhere, her small sanitation kit and her sturdy, inexpensive, Tribu walking sandals. They tossed her a pair of worn thong sandals instead.

"Where are we going, please?"

She addressed her question to the younger and somewhat gentler looking of the two. His only answer was to grip her wrist and pull her into the dark.

Milet kept her head down and her eyes on the ground, as they required her to do on these walks. She knew the men would be angrier still if she stumbled over a rock or a root and they had to wait for her to pull herself up. Sooner than she expected, after only about 15 minutes of walking, they stopped.

"Why are we stopping?"

"Be quiet!" the older of the two shouted. "You are making a fool of our commander!"

Turning to face her, he pulled off her hijab, the black head-and-face veil they forced her to wear. He used it to tie her hands behind her back, then ran a loop of sticky tape around her mouth and roughly pushed her down on her knees. The younger man stood behind her, pushing the barrel

of his M-206 rifle against her head, while the other held his machete on a level with her bent neck and kept her shoulder steady with his left hand.

“*Mabuti pa ikaw ang mamatay kaysa kami!*” the man in front of her shouted. “Better that you should die than us!”

So that’s what triggered this madness, Milet thought. She remembered the Air Force jets and drones she’d heard hovering above the area that whole morning. She had closed her eyes and prayed hard that the bombs would not fall. There was nowhere she could run from her prison house to safety. She knew bombs fall on everyone alike: Christians and Muslims, combatants and noncombatants, adults, children and babies in their cradle hammocks.

As the man in front of her raised his long arms, she could see the shadow of his machete against the moonlight. *Oh my God, that machete is not very sharp!* she realized. In one of the Muslim communities in Sulu where she worked, the men had boasted, “Do you know how we behead? We saw!”

Milet was crying hard inside. How she wished there were more tears, so these men would pity her! With that part of her mind that could sometimes float above her and view things from another angle, she saw herself bowed between the two armed men, with only the cold full moon to witness.

Glancing up, she saw the young man’s stern face, and she shuddered. Then, kneeling on the ground in what might be her last moments, she wondered what had brought him to this place, ready to kill an unarmed noncombatant, a woman, a humanitarian. A question formed in her mind: *How did we end up making him into a monster?*

Milet knew the answer in general terms. It was the long history of injustice that she had summarized not long ago for General Rafael and the military commanders, as well as the warrior culture of many of the islands’ inhabitants – spinning through the centuries in a sad cycle of injury and retaliation. Did he ever have a chance to choose another path?

With her next breath she heard herself apologizing: “For all the sins that the Christians have committed against the Muslim people, I ask forgiveness.”

“Seal her mouth more tightly!” the man with the machete commanded.

The younger man carefully lowered his gun to the ground and began to put more tape over her mouth. Before he could finish, she struggled to speak what could be her last words: “I will never lose respect for the Muslim people who have welcomed me into their homes and adopted me as one of their own. Because of them I have become a better Christian.”

An hour later Milet found herself back in her cell, her knees curled into her chest, still shivering with fear. The two Abu Sayyaf men had returned her to her cell and left her alone, announcing that they would come back to execute her tomorrow.

Memories, Visions and Dreams

*“For it is when I am weak that I am strong.”
– Paul, 2 Corinthians 12:9*

As the weeks went on and it began to seem she might never be released, there were days when she considered ways to end her life. But she had no rope, no pills – nothing she could use to rob her captors of their prize. She tried hitting her head against the wall, but her head seemed the harder of the two, and she was soon exhausted. She would then resort to prayer, thankful for her calling. In her mind, she drifted back to childhood.



“Maybe he’s never coming!” Lai was blubbing. “Maybe some bad guys hit him over the head and stole the car and took him away!”

“It’s alright, Lai. He’s fine, and he’ll be here soon.”

At 6, Mirella, called Lai, was the oldest of the six Mendoza children, but not the most confident. Five-year-old Milet was glad she could comfort her older sister. It helped settle the jumpy feeling in her own stomach. She was glad, too, when her twin Mirali, or Choy, echoed her assurances. “It’s alright, Lai. It’s alright, Jun. Daddy just had to work late. Maybe the traffic is really big. I know he’ll be here soon.”

She pulled out her almost-clean handkerchief and handed it to Jun with a reassuring smile. He blew his nose and stopped sobbing so he could suck on the trailing strap of his schoolbag. Most days, 4-year-old Jun was proud to put on a crisp white shirt with his name on the pocket and go off to school with his big sisters. It was better than staying home with mama and the babies and the *jayas*. Right now, though, he wished he was home on mama’s lap.

Daddy had been late before. The four children at first enjoyed the unaccustomed free time at school. There were other children, their own ages and much older, waiting for their parents too. Today, even after the other children had gone and the last teacher had closed her door until tomorrow, they had played jackstones on the steps, from the pouch Milet carried in her schoolbag. For a while they played hide and seek, then raced each other down the smooth, clean, red-tile corridors, stifling their giggles so they wouldn’t disturb the grumpy custodian who stayed to sweep up. But now school had been out for nearly two hours, and the sun was going down. The security guard had already closed and locked the big iron gate. He never even glanced at them as he turned the key and hurried away.

The four small scholars huddled together on the front steps of Siena College, a speck of humanity at the exact center of its massive stone façade. Milet had an arm around Jun, her twin’s arm was around her, and two of the four were sobbing. Milet wasn’t crying on the outside, but inside she had fears of her own. How would their father get in, now that the gate was locked? What would mama be thinking, waiting at home as the hours went by and the dark came down? Milet knew how much mama worried, even when they were just a little late. What if daddy had fallen

asleep on the long drive from Makati City? That's what happened on the way to school a few weeks ago.

Some days their father would ask one of the girls to sit behind him and rub the back of his neck to help him stay awake. But that day, when it was Lai's turn, she had dozed off, and daddy had too – and driven their Opel straight into a post. Since that day Milet pinched herself to stay awake in the car and always offered to rub daddy's neck, even when she was sleepy from getting up so early in the morning.

The children all loved the new bungalow in the suburbs of Caloocan City, where they had moved the previous year from the crowded apartment in Quezon City. It took a long time, now, to drive from home to the school and back. Milet's *yaya* told her the village was named for a Moro princess who lived long ago, before the Spanish came. Some days, when she was waiting for daddy, Milet liked to imagine that she was a princess, and that this enormous school building with its six tall floors was her own castle with 100 rooms full of treasure. Whenever she could, she found a quiet place in the busy Mendoza household to sit and imagine herself in a beautiful story.

But now the quiet was scary, and she could feel Choy sobbing against her. She said a small prayer under her breath, and right away she felt calmer. Daddy would come. She knew he would.

Soon they would all be singing along with the radio in their fast, shiny car. The children heard a firm stride, the swish and bustle of skirts, the rattle of rosary beads, then the voice of a young Dominican, Sister Rosa. Lai stopped sobbing, and four pairs of eyes turned in the same direction.

“My goodness! Are you all still here? Come over to the convent with me and we'll see what we can do.”

Lai, Choy, Milet and Jun followed her black veil and starched white habit, walking single file past the classrooms for the older children to the far edge of the building where the sisters lived. Sister Rosa seated the children in four big chairs on the balcony of the convent and then pushed through the tall, heavy door and the swinging door to the kitchen. In minutes, she carried out buttered slices of bread on a tray along with four mugs of carabao milk.

Jun still hadn't finished his bread when they heard the familiar horn of the Opel at the gate. They heard a sister's sweet voice, and then their father's familiar one. She and their father were still talking when he came onto the balcony. Milet's heart rose at the sound of his firm step, as the sister moved quickly to reassure him.

“Attorney Mendoza, I understand. We know your work is critical to the economy. The children are fine, as you can see.”

Milet had tried hard to stay awake in the car, but the next thing she knew she was at home. Daddy had come. They were all together. Everything was right in her world.



“I feel awful. I can’t even stand up.”

“That’s too bad. Because otherwise you could go home today.”

In a flash Milet was on her feet. Before the day was over, she was being escorted away by the brother of the vice-governor of Basilan. After 61 days, she was on her way home.

Freedom is So Sweet

We're landing in Manila. We're in EDSA. Oh, this is the street daddy used to drive on when he brought us home from school, and the street I rode along when I came home so proudly to give him my very first paycheck.

This is the street where my youngest brother Almir was bitten by the dog, and we all brought him home together, when he had to have those awful rabies shots. This is the garden where we bathed our pet pig ... that was such a dear, clean little pig! And the aratilis tree that we climbed in, gorging on the sweet red fruit ...

Mommy, we're home!

It all looks the same ... and it all looks so different ... and I didn't think I'd see any of it, ever again.

Looking down for just a minute, Milet texted her joy and gratitude to a dear friend: "I am genuinely, thankfully happy. My heart is feasting."



On the day she left Commander Mike's Abu Sayyaf turf, the hijab was Milet's own idea. With only her eyes showing, and the odd calm that this black head covering produced in her body, she felt almost as much like Fatima Ali – the name on the false identification her friends had produced to help her elude the media – as she did like Milet Mendoza.

After all the changes it was hard to believe this was happening, but she trusted her visions and her good friends. She set out on yet another walk, with the vice-governor's brother, to the home of the vice-governor in Lamitan. She allowed herself to be passed from hand to hand until at last she was in a room full of friends and she knew she was truly free. "Freedom is so sweet" was the first thing she told them.

Milet's first phone calls were to her twin sister and mother, to let the family know she was free. After that, her main concern was to avoid the media glare. She felt vulnerable, almost skinless. *Why did people have to keep taking pictures and asking all these questions?* Her captors had told her that Abu Sayyaf was everywhere. How could she be sure they wouldn't strike again?

The plan was to take her straight from the plane to a hospital in Manila. The friends in the first car found the entrance swarming with media, so they called inside and made arrangements for them to enter through the basement parking lot. Milet was so worried about how the anxiety had affected her parents that she asked for a room with three beds. Attorney Mendoza insisted he was fine, but Alicia, her mother, stayed with her for the five days she was in the hospital. Milet couldn't wait to tell her mother what a comfort she had been to her in her dreams. Unlike all the strangers who felt they had a right to know about the captivity, Alicia asked very few questions.

After months of going out only at night, she was eager to see the sun, but when she walked in the hospital courtyard its brightness was almost too much for her. It was many months before she could shake the habit of walking with eyes cast down, as she had been forced to do on those long night walks.

Over the next weeks and months Milet learned how many people had been working for her release, and how many more strangers had been praying for her. At Assisi Foundation headquarters, people signed up to pray the rosary in front of the Blessed Sacrament for every hour of the working day, a vigil for her and Espie. Friends and relatives and the far-flung members of several religious orders had included them among their intentions day by day, and her colleagues in the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network she helped to found had been sending up Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Confucian prayers.

“I owe so much to so many people, and I have no idea how I can repay them,” she told her mentor and dear friend, Ambassador Dee.

“If something is given out of love, Milet, it requires no repayment,” Ambassador Dee replied. “Please don’t even think about it again. The matter is closed.”



After her sweet homecoming on November 19, 2009, Milet stayed with her parents until she was sure that all was well with them. She thanked her family and all those who she knew had worked for her release. Then, craving silence, she went on a series of retreats. She had some healing to do, and she knew that sisters in the religious order would provide a healing environment: silence and isolation that she freely chose, and patient, undemanding company when she didn’t choose to be alone.

In the solitude of the prayer room, Milet came upon a song that crystallized her captivity experience: “Holy Darkness” by Dan Schutte. It was inspired by the spiritual dark night and the physical captivity of the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross.

I have tried you in fires of affliction;
I have taught your soul to grieve.
In the barren soil of your loneliness,
there I will plant my seed.

In the weeks since her captivity Milet had felt a cascade of shifting, conflicting emotions, but she had not cried. Now she let the tears come, and it was a blessed release.

I have taught you the price of compassion;
you have stood before the grave.
Though my love can seem
like a raging storm,
this is the love that saves.



As the months went by and her healing progressed, Milet continued to refuse requests for TV, radio and newspaper interviews. Her criteria were simple: Will this help other captives and their families? Will it influence the government to change the conditions that feed kidnapping?

Kidnapping was on the rise, unfortunately, so there were other former captives around to sate the media's appetite. But, from her study, decades of work with NGOs and the efforts she made to engage her captors, Milet had information the government and military were eager to have. If she thought sharing it was likely to endanger the civilians she had lived among, she called a halt. If it might change the simplistic, misguided attempts to destroy Abu Sayyaf by overwhelming force, she was willing to share.

A few months after her release, with the support of the Asia Foundation, she held a meeting to brief organizations working in Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi about the region's human needs and security considerations. Around the same time, assisted by a carefully chosen psychologist, she organized a confidential gathering with four other kidnap survivors and their family members. She spent a summer as a Rotary Peace Fellow, earning a certificate in peace and conflict studies at Chulalongkorn University, in Bangkok, Thailand. She edited a book, *Challenges to Human Security in Complex Situations*. She delivered papers at conferences in Malaysia and Bangladesh.

But perhaps most important, she went back to Mindanao, to Tabawan in Tawi-Tawi. Before Milet's kidnapping, in early 2008 her dear friend Father Rey had been brutally murdered. It was January 15, the night before Milet's birthday. He was dragged out of the chapel at Notre Dame High School during evening prayers, hacked and shot to death as he struggled with his assailants. She had gone to Tabawan in March, after his funeral, to share stories and photos from his funeral in Manila. After her captivity, she had to go again to Tawi-Tawi to tell the people he served how much he loved them, and how many had heard his story, and theirs, during the weeks when his life and death had been front-page news in the capital. She wanted them to know how he had supported her through her ordeal, and that his spirit was there to guide them too. It was essential for the students, in particular, to believe that life would be better if they persevered in their studies, even though their *Tata*, or Father, was no longer there to rejoice.

I'm going to find a way to continue to get financial support for the outstanding students like he did, Milet told herself.

The love that Father Rey's Sama-Muslim community had for him moved Milet, and the responsibility came with it. One way to discharge that was to make it other people's responsibility too. When the bishop came for school graduation, Milet arranged a forum for more than 60 children to share with him what Father Rey had done for them and their families. She also organized a group of friends who contribute \$50 each month to meet college expenses for one of the school's promising graduates. Milet herself collects books for the library, donates what she can and visits at least three times a year.



Milet was in a public procession to commemorate the first anniversary of the death of Father Rey in Tabawan when a flock of women surrounded her. The grandmothers of Tabawan demanded her attention in the high-pitched Sama language that sounds to an outsider like the music of urgent birds. Tears gathered in the wrinkles of their weathered faces as they took turns kissing her and pulling her in the direction of one of the stilt homes. A flock of small children followed in their wake.

When the women stopped walking, she saw that inside one of the stilt houses was a wooden *ombo*, or shrine to the ancestors, decked with offerings of native rice.

Shrines like this were not uncommon at this cultural crossroads, where Islam was liberally mixed with folk religion, but this one was larger than the others and clearly important to them all. The women sprinkled her with holy water and indicated by gestures that she should bow in thanksgiving as they were bowing. Milet whispered to one of the older children, “Will you translate for me, please?”

Several children obliged at once. “They’re saying that they prayed for you here at this shrine each night while you were with the Abu Sayyaf. Now you are here, healthy and free! Their prayers have been answered, and they are giving thanks to the ancestors. They want you to thank the ancestors too, ma’am.”

Milet knelt gratefully and prayed.

“Those people who kidnapped you are not the true Muslims,” Rainu, Father Rey’s best friend explained to her. “We are all rooted in Adam.”



Healing progressed, and fear abated. Milet began to look up and read the signs that told her where she was. But she wasn’t orienting as well as she used to. She was getting lost easily.

In the back of her head, the scene of her near-execution replayed itself time and again. Like Father Rey, she had grown skeptical about peace and development theory. Practice was the true test. She had abandoned her master’s thesis, almost 20 years earlier, because the propositions all seemed fleshless and abstract. Now she had a wealth of experience – including a great deal she would not have chosen.

The long hours of reflection in her own holy darkness affirmed the practice wisdom she had developed over the years, and especially in the last few years. But when she least expected it, the machete gleamed in the moonlight, and questions gnawed at the back of her brain. *Why did those words come from my lips? What kind of theory explains my spontaneous appeal for forgiveness?*



Early in 2010, Milet was at an international conference on public forgiveness at Nijmegen University in the Netherlands. She listened to the various, mostly theoretical presentations with varying degrees of interest. When a Dutch friend asked her to tell her own forgiveness story, she complied diffidently, bemused and almost apologetic.

When she finished, participants came, one after another, to tell her how moved they had been. “Thank you,” Milet responded. “But I came here to seek answers to what happened to me. What’s the theory?”

The next day she heard a presentation that moved *her*. Alistair Little joined the Protestant paramilitaries at the age of 14, during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. At 17 he shot a man. During 12 years in prison, he was transformed and renounced violence. Since his release he has worked for peace, most recently with the Healing of Memories Project. But he still hasn’t decided where he stands on forgiveness. He’s fairly sure he doesn’t deserve it.

During a long chilly walk with Milet around Nijmegen, her new friend told her essentially the same thing Ambassador Dee had told her: “Don’t ask.” Healing, peace, deliverance are spiritual realities with mystery at their core. The answer to a mystery is Yes, not How or Why.

A strange thing happened in the Netherlands. Heading out to visit the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam, Milet suddenly realized she knew where she was going. *Here’s the Central Station. Here’s Herengracht, and Keizergracht! That’s the Westermarkt there, and here’s the house. The sun is shining, and I see flowers. How you would have loved them, little Anne!*

She felt the same kind of joy she had felt coming back to her home village, a year and a half before. Milet was at home, wherever she was in the world. And her heart was feasting.

*“We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”
– T.S. Eliot*

Abangan ang susunod na vabanata.
(To be continued)

A CONVERSATION WITH MILET B. MENDOZA

The following is a compilation of quotations taken from interviews conducted by Mary Liepold between Sept. 13 and Nov. 5, 2010.

On Building Peace

Building peace is like walking on broken glass. You depend so much on goodwill, confidence building; you depend so much on trust relationships. The mastery of the art of peace goes hand in hand with the mastery of the self, and that strength that you bring with you is reinforced by your relationships with people who are in very difficult situations. I am grateful to them for giving me the courage to be there, to accompany them.

Peace work is the art of human appreciation. It's recognizing that everyone can change and grow. Because we allow our spirit to lead us, we continue to be open in our search for the elusive peace. The signposts are opened by the people you encounter, because you have that sense of mutual accompaniment. Sometimes you walk side by side, sometimes someone leads, the other follows. Peace work is openness, openness of the heart. The mind follows. The spirit leads.

Peace work is like going through this difficult captivity experience. It is not just in the armed conflict. It is also in the structural violence that diminishes the dignity of people, deprives them of their potential.

On Development

Whether it's daycare, water, sanitation – it's peacebuilding, and every peacebuilding act is also an act of healing. You come in and elicit from the people their own talents and skills so they can make that positive change themselves, not because of external support. They take pride in that, and then you articulate that back to them.

Outsiders – military people, NGOs, international NGOs, donors – they come in with a focus that is biased toward what is technical. What is oftentimes overlooked is the social. You not only deal with personal but also collective trauma. So when you come into a conflict area you need to do your work within that realm. You have to manage the intangibles very delicately and sensitively.

What we were trying to assert and showcase in the time just before I was taken hostage was this difficult path in a context where the mindset had been reinforced by money, by funding. Outsiders come in saying, "We have the funds, let's work on something." But I was affirmed in my engagement that even without a centavo, but with an open heart and a listening ear, we were able to draw what is best from each other. Otherwise, without that essence, you just raise the money and give, and then the minute you step out people are back to zero because you didn't open up opportunities for them to see their own goodness.

At first I too came in thinking I knew better. I had been given so many opportunities to learn the tools of the trade, only to realize the people transform me much more than I transform them.

“At first I too came in thinking I knew better. I had been given so many opportunities to learn the tools of the trade, only to realize the people transform me much more than I transform them.”

Self-mastery compels one to be humble. If you are humble you are able to listen. You believe a poor person is not too poor to give something and a rich person is not too rich to ask for something. Once, during the drought in south central Mindanao, the bishop was driving me and we went to this mountain region doing medical care for the indigenous communities in Malita. People would come down from the mountains and fall in line. This one family, they were in line but the kids were lying on the ground, too weak to stand, so I had to pull them out of the line for priority attention. The doctors administered first aid and told them they had to go to the town hospital. They needed more sophisticated care than we could give. They set out, mother and father and children on this tiny malnourished horse, and before they left they reached inside their pockets and gave me these tiny coins. “This is our donation, for your good work.” They had so many hours still to go to town. I was moved. Still, in their own poverty they also wanted to give. Everyone has something to give, and they have the answers.

I remember another man, a big man. His family was displaced by the war in Mindanao. I gave him a food pack that would only last him two days and I said, “I am very sorry that this is all I can give you.” Do you know what he said? “Never apologize for any help you give, no matter how little you think it is. This will help us survive for another day.”

A drop in the bucket is significant. This is all you can do for the moment. But the drop counts. Yesterday I was thinking about this light in the darkness, this ripple effect. The darkness intensifies the light. That’s why any little thing you do is light.

We have to disabuse ourselves that we have the solutions, that we know the solutions. It’s the facilitative role that we play, creating opportunities for people who have been denied the opportunity to find out what they already know and experience their own goodness. So you come out of any engagement bettered in terms of your insights, and the people are more empowered.

“We have to disabuse ourselves that we have the solutions, that we know the solution. It’s the facilitative role that we play, creating opportunities for people ... to find out what they already know and experience their own goodness.”

Working in disaster regions where people were homeless, where people were hungry, you want to reach donors' hearts with their stories and their faces, but I made up my mind that I would never take pictures of children looking pitiful or hopeless. I don't take pictures of starving children; I take pictures of happy children.

It's a matter of human dignity. Because if that were your own child, if that child were to grow up some day and see that picture, you would feel pain. And you're not raising money because it's pitiful but because of the hope in that child.

On Being Called

I think we are all called to be peacemakers. We all have our own destined paths to peace. Your calling, your vision, your mission in life is something that reveals itself to you as you take the path, when you get close to whatever you are set out to do. It is a call to service, a higher goal beyond yourself. It is your faith in God and faith in others that lead you on the track. There are so many hurdles, but each hurdle is accepted because your calling is beyond yourself. It entails a conscious decision to let go of anything that traps you, that doesn't allow you to take the forward movement. And that is faith.

There is an inner voice that guides you, affirms your choice, gives you more courage so even if you have fear you overcome that. That inner GPS is honed because you have answered your call, and because of that your spirit guides are there for you – in the form of art, in the form of symbols, in the form of human communication. Peacebuilding now becomes a very multifaceted discipline. You come in a psychologist, anthropologist, artist, all kinds, all packed into one.

The calling will not change. We just have to find very creative ways of responding to that call. This former very humble and wise boss of mine, Ambassador Howard Q. Dee, a very prayerful man, would say, in all his wisdom: "When we are not sure of certain things, it is always better to err on the side of the poor, of the weak, of the vulnerable, to take chances."

"I think we are all called to be peacemakers. . . . The calling will not change. We just have to find very creative ways of responding to that call."

It's no longer important why you are particularly called to do this. That's being too self-absorbed. You uncover, you get close to who your caller is as you move towards that destiny. It was only when I said yes to my calling – to that very powerful voice that attracted me like a magnet – that I experienced who God was in my life, and it was totally different from what I thought him to be. I experienced a personal loving God who talks to me inside my heart.

I am given lampposts. There is light along the way that says "This is the direction." It's like an invisible map. As I am grateful for these lampposts, I aspire to serve as a lamppost to someone who needs light in her path. I am just a piece of it, but she completes her story.

On Being a Woman

Do you know what this process of documentation has revealed to me? I never really realized that all this time I have been a woman in a man's world, dealing with warrior leaders and heads of corporations and military officials and bishops. I never really realized until now about vulnerability and power, about having strength in vulnerability.

My best friend tells me that my greatest gift is drawing out the best in other people. I think maybe the secret is recognizing that the warriors, the military, the bishops – each of them has something more to give. Latent or manifested, it's there. Even perhaps with the Abu Sayyaf.

You are a companion. Sometimes you hold the hand and sometimes you let go. I don't see a Muslim as a Muslim. I don't see a male as a male. I don't see myself just as a woman. No one can argue with that. The enigma is, when you're a channel, people are drawn to you.

On Being an IPJ Woman PeaceMaker

Here's my dilemma. I know the expectation of being here is to talk about myself. I wish to convey my spirit and who I am – whoever that person is – in a manner that gets clearer when I tell the stories of other people and how their lives have intertwined with mine. I see individuals like Ambassador Dee as a model – a quiet, humble person, and yet he's like a glimmer of light in the dark because of his humility. He's still bursting with magnetic attraction. Can we shape our story in a way that conveys the goodness of other people, many people in our lives? If it's just about me, it's boring. There is no big deal in that. Peace will not happen if people only think of themselves.

“I wish to convey my spirit and who I am ... in a manner that gets clearer when I tell the stories of other people and how their lives are intertwined with mine.”

A Woman PeaceMaker name is a blessing that's tied on to me; it's just a bonus. The goodness that people attribute to me is not my own. It is God's grace. I am called to be good, struggling as any human does. It always fits into the bigger story, how I was molded through all the significant people in my life, whether the good ones or the bad ones.

But that's why I want to share only for a higher purpose: policy change, or even at the personal level that it can illuminate. The journey continues, and it's a very difficult journey. Maybe I have graduated to a certain level, but I still want my feet on the ground.

My experience so far reveals to me that anything you do is a yes, it is a choice, but it is also a conscious, deliberate commitment every day. Every day you commit to that.

PRINCIPLES OF PEACEBUILDING

Community Engagement

PEACEMAKING PRINCIPLE	EXAMPLE
Respect the dignity of every human being. Demonstrate respect in thoughts, word and deed. This is the essence of human relationship and the touchstone for every peace and development intervention.	Milet insists on an apology and due compensation from military officials when human rights violations are committed, particularly against women and children.
Respect culture, tradition, custom and belief. Do ground-based planning to underscore local values and local strengths. Demonstrate respect and sensitivity for local beliefs and tradition.	Father Rey organizes Voices of Tabawan to highlight the leadership and potential of local nongovernmental leaders in making positive changes in Tabawan in Tawi-Tawi.
The local context must define the engagement approach. Educate yourself and partners about the complex historical and cultural context of each situation. Learn, teach, listen and appreciate the context.	Tabang Mindanaw advocates for a deeper understanding about Sulu in its documentation, “Developing a Culture of Peace in Sulu.”
Identify local leaders and gatekeepers, trust them and earn their trust. Listen to the critics as well as the yea-sayers, but be wary of vested interests.	Milet and her team earn the trust of their community project partners in the Islamic municipalities in Sulu.
Identify the community’s own perceived needs and priorities. Research options and present them to the community using familiar popular media and avoiding technical jargon. Hold public forums within the comfort level of the local setting, as well as private informal conversations. Listen well. Act on the understanding that their ownership will sustain the work you do together.	Milet and her colleagues frequently dialogue informally with local partners and community members as a basis of assessment for subsequent actions.
Value volunteers as integral partners. Invite and welcome helpers, especially from among those you are helping.	Milet trains evacuee women as peer educators in emergency nutritional feeding for internally displaced persons.
Invite widespread collaboration; coordinate efforts for maximum benefit. Start with those on the ground and share the opportunity with partners from a wide variety of sectors.	Tabang Mindanaw initiates multi-sector collaborative engagement in bridging social divides, beginning with and expanding from its frontline partners.

<p>Build local ownership and capacity. Scale down your engagement as local partners take on primary responsibility and accountability; i.e., “Decrease so others may increase.”¹²</p>	<p>Milet is clear about Tabang Mindanaw’s role as a companion in the peoples’ journey, gradually positioning itself behind the peoples’ own leadership.</p>
<p>Showcase the community’s achievements on its own behalf. Articulate back to the people their success and positive accomplishments, and facilitate public forums to share it with others.</p>	<p>Milet dialogues with the elected leaders and members of the ASA microfinance program in Jolo for transparent discussions on their accomplishments as well as oversights.</p>

Practice Ethics

PEACEMAKING PRINCIPLE	EXAMPLE
<p>Practice transparency. To build and maintain trust, share information with sensitivity, openly and widely. Meet face to face with people whenever possible.</p>	
<p>Be open to learn from those you serve. Ask stakeholders to define their own needs and identify their own solutions. Create forums for respectful exchange, and listen well.</p>	<p>Milet facilitates local consultations on human security, with the people working out their own questions and responses on what brings sustainable peace.</p>
<p>Promote mutual accountability. Require accountability from yourself and others. Rigorously track performance and document inputs, outputs and feedback.</p>	<p>Milet makes it clear to communities she works with that dishonesty and corruption will not be tolerated.</p>
<p>Be accountable primarily to program partners or beneficiaries.</p>	<p>Milet conducts projects by explaining the process, soliciting feedback, updating communities on progress and collectively monitoring results.</p>
<p>Serve no agenda other than human dignity. Do nothing to further any economic, political or religious advantage.</p>	
<p>Exercise a preferential option for the poorest of the poor and the most vulnerable in a community.</p>	<p>Milet works with Father Rey in Tawi-Tawi to meet the urgent needs of Filipino deportees from Sabah, Malaysia.</p>
<p>Do no harm.</p>	

Supplement but do not supplant government aid.	Milet is clear about engaging government offices and institutions for the purpose of enhancing their own service delivery mandates.
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Spiritual Health

PEACMAKING PRINCIPLE	EXAMPLE
Respect the spiritual dimension of healing and culture change. Understand that a purely technical approach cannot bring lasting change.	Milet prays with the grandmothers of Tabawan and with her captors.
Recognize and celebrate big and little gains. Accept limitations and rejoice in what you can do.	Milet, Ambassador Dee and the Diocese of Kidapawan celebrate the freeing of the Mantimos.
Be willing to lose in order to win. Let go of attachment to short-term gains.	Milet looks forward to the rest of her life with nothing held back.
Expect mutual values transformation. Free yourself from the false delusion that you know better and that you are there to change people's values and transform them.	Milet realizes that she gained more self transformation from staying grounded.
Heed your inner compass. Follow where the spirit leads. Recognize the people you encounter as your lampposts to guide your path to peace.	Milet leaves her comfort zone to follow the call of the spirit, despite her fears and insecurities.
Manage the intangibles.	Milet respects the collective pain and traumas that need to be addressed and managed sensitively.

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BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER –
MARY LIEPOLD



Photo credit: Michelle Zousmer

Mary Liepold is editor in chief for the global community of Peace X Peace, an e-network for women around the world. Since 2005 she has interviewed hundreds of peacemakers in more than 100 countries for Peace X Peace's PeaceTimes and Voices from the Frontlines. Before that she created the magazine Children's Voice and wrote speeches, proposals and a range of advocacy materials for the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). In the 1980s, before her 15 years at CWLA, she was assistant director of the American Catholic Lay Network, a project of the Center of Concern, and a regional coordinator at Peace Links. She also wrote and edited publications for the National Science Teachers Association, FEMA and the American Geophysical Union. Earlier still, she earned a doctorate in American literature from the Catholic University of America while operating a family daycare business. Both undertakings offered rich opportunities for passionate peacebuilding. Liepold is also a mother, grandmother, Secular Franciscan, board member of Pax Christi Metro D.C.-Baltimore and student of Nonviolent Communication.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In Nepal, for example, for nearly a decade the IPJ has been working with Nepali groups to support inclusiveness and dialogue in the transition from armed conflict and monarchy to peace and multiparty democracy. In its West African Human Rights Training Initiative, the institute partners with local human rights groups to strengthen their ability to pressure government for reform and accountability.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADRRN	Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
CWLA	Child Welfare League of America
EDSA	Epifanio De Los Santos Avenue
GRP	Government of the Republic of the Philippines
IP	Indigenous Peoples
IPJ	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MOA-AD	Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain
NAMFREL	National Movement for Free Elections
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
OPAPP	Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process
USD	University of San Diego

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

² The author thanks Victor M. Taylor, former Tabang Mindanaw consultant on the Sulu Culture of Peace Program, and Rudy B. Rodil, former Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology, Department of History professor and Government-MNFL/MILF Peace Panel member, for their personal review and corrections.

³ The 2000 government census counts 24 ethno-linguistic groups of indigenous peoples, totaling 1.5 million people.

⁴ Samuel K. Tan, *A History of the Philippines*. See Further Reading section.

⁵ <http://www.rewardsforjustice.net>

⁶ Introduction to Judd-Schiavo 2005.

⁷ Tan, *A History of the Philippines*.

⁸ The International Monitoring Team is led by Malaysia and includes Brunei, Japan, Libya, Norway and the European Union, along with the International Committee of the Red Cross, Nonviolent Peaceforce and the Mindanao Peoples Caucus.

⁹ The author thanks Victor M. Taylor, former Tabang Mindanaw consultant on the Sulu Culture of Peace Program, and Rudy B. Rodil, former Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology Department of History Professor and Government-MNFL/MILF Peace Panel Member, for their personal review and corrections.

¹⁰ See Conflict History for more information on the movement of populations between Malaysia and the Sulu archipelago, and the general conflict between the Malaysian and Philippine governments.

¹¹ “Aunt” in Tagalog.

¹² Paraphrase of John 3:30.