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# **BEING PEACE:** **The Life and Work of Marta Benavides** **of El Salvador**

**By Leigh Fenly, Peace Writer**

**Edited by Emiko Noma**



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**2009 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.<sup>1</sup>

**BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER –**  
**MARTA BENAVIDES**



Photo credit: Sun & Moon Vision Productions

Marta Benavides of El Salvador is one of the surviving activists from the original group of human rights and peace advocates who began their work during the 1970s and the rising climate of repression. A leader of an ecumenical revolution focused on bringing peace to her country, the ordained pastor who chose “to live and not die for the revolution” has been bringing people at all levels – politics, the arts, law enforcement, religious, cultural, gender, agriculture and labor – together to defend human rights and develop a culture of peace.

During the early 1980s, Benavides was head of the Ecumenical Committee for Humanitarian Aid (CEAH), a group sponsored by her close friend Archbishop Óscar Romero to support victims of violence. With the committee, she established the first refugee centers for people displaced by the violence. Almost two years after Romero’s assassination, Benavides went into exile and worked for the next decade from Mexico and the United States to bring an end to the war in her home country. With Ecumenical Ministries for Development and Peace, she developed programs to promote understanding and reconciliation among peoples and groups and end intra- and inter-family violence. She also built networks of international solidarity for a negotiated peaceful political solution to the conflict in El Salvador.

In 1992 after the peace accords were signed, Benavides returned home and founded the International Institute for Cooperation Amongst Peoples, also known as the Institute for the 23rd Century, which promotes the values of a culture of peace through a variety of programs. She established community training centers and continues to travel throughout the country conducting workshops on, among other topics, sustainable agriculture, human rights and the prevention of community and family violence, particularly violence against women and children. Her efforts have led to extensive collaboration with the United Nations, the World Council of Churches and numerous other partners, and in 2005 she was one of the 1,000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Benavides has dedicated her life to rebuilding communities devastated by war and has brought renewal, both figurative and literal, to formerly scorched earth.

## **CONFLICT HISTORY – EL SALVADOR**

Before the Spanish conquest, the area that is now El Salvador was composed of three indigenous states and several principalities. The indigenous inhabitants were the Pipils, a group of the nomadic people of Nahua who migrated south from Mexico, perhaps arriving in El Salvador in 1000 A.D. The region of the east was populated and governed by the Lencas. The north zone of the Lempa River was populated and governed by the Chortis, a Mayan people. The Nahua lived in the west. All three groups established a communal, agricultural way of life that remained virtually unchanged until the Spaniards arrived.

In 1524, after conquering Mexico, Hernán Cortés sent his chief lieutenant, Pedro de Alvarado, on a mission to take over the area that is now Guatemala and El Salvador. Pipil warriors forced the Spanish to retreat, but they returned a year later to finish the job, bringing the district under the control of the Captaincy General of Guatemala. It was Alvarado who changed the indigenous name *Cuzcatlán*, (“Land of Riches and Jewels”) to *El Salvador* (“The Savior”).

Within 50 years, violence and disease reduced the indigenous population from 500,000 to 75,000. By creating *haciendas* (large land holdings), *encomiendas* (land worked by the indigenous people) and *mitas* (mines, specifically for gold), the Spaniards created the export-dependent economy and disparity between rich and poor that remain defining characteristics to this day. Through centuries of intense poverty and historic political repression, El Salvador developed a steadfast tradition of popular rebellion and defiance.

In 1811, Salvadoran priest José Matías Delgado sounded the bells of Iglesia La Merced in San Salvador in a call for insurrection, the first peal on the path to independence. A second uprising followed three years later. Worldwide, revolution was in the air. Indigenous Salvadorans took inspiration from the American and French revolutions and also the weakening of the military power of the Spanish crown after its wars with Napoleonic France. The elite – merchants and intellectuals – had also grown weary of Spanish influence and wanted to expand their export markets to Great Britain and the United States.

In 1821, El Salvador and the four other Central American provinces – Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica – declared their independence from Spain and two years later formed the United Provinces of Central America. In 1838, the federation dissolved and El Salvador became an independent republic.

Independence, however, did not bring liberation from poverty or exploitation. The country continued to be controlled in a localized manner, aided by geography and politics. In El Salvador, the smallest of the Central American countries, many rivers could only be crossed at major fords, and there were few roads that could handle wheeled vehicles. Constitutionally, supermajority power was granted in the national legislature for the wealthy; by law, a majority of seats went to landowners.

The major crop was indigo, used as a dye and exported to Great Britain, El Salvador’s main trading partner. But when chemical dyes replaced indigo in the 1850s, El Salvador’s wealthy landowners switched crops and altered history. At the time, coffee was in high demand and potentially extremely profitable. It also could be grown where indigo could not, thereby suddenly

placing great value on the lands used by indigenous people for planting corn, beans and vegetables for sustenance. By the late 19th century, coffee had become king in El Salvador – accounting for 95 percent of export earnings – and U.S. interests were surpassing those of the British.

To make way for coffee, the elite-controlled legislature passed vagrancy laws that removed indigenous people from their ancestral lands and eventually abolished indigenous communal lands altogether. A majority of Salvadorans became landless and were forced to work on the *fincas*, coffee plantations that had absorbed their own lands, or migrate to the cities to earn miserably low wages as maids, gardeners, factory workers and prostitutes.

To suppress indigenous discontent, the government began a campaign of suppression that would continue for decades. In 1912, the national guard was created as a rural police force. The military government supported infrastructure – railroads and port facilities – to increase coffee profits.

As profits grew, so did the influence of a tightly knit group of large landowners. The so-called *Los Catorce*, or “14 Families,” (actually dozens of families) intermarried, conducted business together and essentially ruled El Salvador.

By the 1920s, peasants and city dwellers had had enough. They began organizing to seek change through politics and peaceful demonstrations. In December 1922, a women’s march through the center of the capital, San Salvador, was fired upon by the army and dozens of women died. More resistance would follow, as would more violence.

The hallmark of Gen. Maximiliano Hernández Martínez’s reign as president was the brutal suppression of rural resistance. In 1932, Augustín Farabundo Martí, a leader of indigenous groups, planned a coordinated workers’ revolt and peasant uprising. The general’s response was swift and brutal. Martí and many of his colleagues were executed and over 30,000 other Salvadorans, most of them indigenous, were murdered, imprisoned or exiled. As a result, survivors of *La Matanza* (“The Massacre”) abandoned their indigenous language, dress and culture, and protests from the poor were silenced for decades.

Fearing instability and threats to American property and observing the communist rebellion, Herbert Hoover’s administration in the United States supported the government’s actions, beginning a lengthy history of American support for El Salvador’s military rulers. For the next 50 years, periodic presidential elections were seldom free or fair, and the military protected the interests of the oligarchy against the peasants who lived in poverty and fear.

In 1969, under the presidency of Gen. Fidel Sánchez Hernández, a conflict with Honduras escalated into war. Honduras threatened to expel 300,000 Salvadorans who had moved into the open spaces in the western part of the country. Hoping to stop the expulsion, El Salvador invaded its neighbor, dropping bombs from outfitted passenger planes. The so-called “Soccer War,” linked to rival hopes of qualifying for the 1970 World Cup, was over in five days. But the incident had lasting consequences, essentially spelling an end to the functioning of the Central American Common Market, which had benefitted El Salvador far more than the less industrialized Honduras. Moreover, as many as 130,000 peasants were at least temporarily driven out of Honduras and into overcrowded El Salvador.

The international economic crisis of the 1970s hit El Salvador's coffee economy hard and brought increased political unrest to the nation. At the time, the wealthiest 2 percent of Salvadorans owned 60 percent of the land, and new ventures in banking, insurance and industry had further solidified their power. Workers faced a different reality; in the service and manufacturing sectors, the average daily wage was \$1.64.

To crush political opposition, the military and allied right-wing death squads, financed by the oligarchy, launched a series of attacks. Governmental repression, however, did little to change the will of the people, and, in fact, had the opposite effect. As the government's brutality increased, the popularity of the opposition forces grew. Leftist guerilla organizations formed and became more vocal, demanding land reform and political change.

The opposition to government rule went beyond the rural peasants. The urban middle class, also suffering economically, sought moderate reforms to modernize the economy and open up the political process.

In the 1972 presidential election, opponents of military rule united under José Napoleón Duarte, leader of the Christian Democratic Party and mayor of San Salvador. Amid widespread fraud, Duarte's broad-based reform movement was defeated. Subsequent protest and an attempted coup were crushed, and Duarte was tortured and exiled.

As reform options disappeared, support for drastic change grew. Revolutionary forces found great support in the countryside, where since 1961 the percentage of landless families had risen from 12 to 40 percent. Many were persuaded that democratic means of change had been exhausted and that the only hope for reform was through armed insurrection. At the same time, the Sandinista victory against the Somoza regime in neighboring Nicaragua demonstrated that revolutionary change was indeed possible in Central America.

Also, within the Catholic Church a new spirit of activism was emerging following the Second Vatican Council and the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops, held in Medellín, Colombia. Progressive young priests began organizing study sessions in which peasants reflected on local conditions in light of biblical texts. Traditional fatalism gave way to the view that poverty and repression were less a matter of God's will than of human injustice. Rural women who had never imagined a political role for themselves joined the outcry for land reform, motivated by a newly instilled religious belief that justice could prevail on Earth.

In 1977, Óscar Romero was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador. Although his politics were reputed to be conservative, Romero would eventually become a forceful critic of the military government. He frequently urged soldiers to refuse to carry out what he characterized as immoral orders. His high profile made him an important political figure, and he used his influence to argue against U.S. aid to El Salvador.

In the late 1970s, many popular organizations came together to form large coalitions, or fronts, which openly called for a revolutionary alternative to the military dictatorship. These massive fronts succeeded in mobilizing tens of thousands of Salvadorans who were previously excluded from political activity, providing them with a new self-confidence in their abilities to affect change and confront the government. Young people were particularly active, including

many young women – students, workers, peasants – who found an opening for involvement in a political arena traditionally dominated by men.

As many men fled their homes in fear of death squads, joined the opposition or were recruited into the army, women bore much of the burden of ensuring their families' survival. In 1978, almost 40 percent of households in San Salvador's poorest neighborhoods were headed by women, according to a study by the United Nations. As the violence continued, the percentage rose to an estimated 70 percent.

In 1977, Col. Carlos Huberto Romero won a far-from-free election that was met with loud popular protest. As president, he issued the Law for the Defense and Guarantee of Public Order that banned public assemblies and granted arbitrary authority to security forces. Violence increased. Between 1972 and 1977, political deaths in the country numbered almost 50,000 – 37,342 among the opposition; 10,000 on the government side.

Over the next two years, polarization escalated and culminated in the president's ouster by a junta of junior officers in mid-October 1979. This coup would be a prelude to the bloodiest and most traumatic period in El Salvador's history. When the junta failed to make promised improvements to living conditions, discontent provoked the five main guerilla groups in the country to unite in the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

In 1980, El Salvador's civil war officially began. When it was over 12 years later, 80,000 people had died, 500,000 were displaced within the country, 1 million were in exile and infrastructure damage topped \$1.6 billion. Aid, both monetary and military, from the United States to the Salvadoran government continued throughout the war. At the height of the conflict, U.S. aid averaged \$1.5 million a day. The United States ceased support in 1990 after the United Nations became involved and the U.S. Congress confirmed reports of brutal human rights violations.

From the early days of the war, the government-supported military targeted anyone suspected of supporting reform. Often the victims were unionists, clergy, independent farmers and university officials. Before it was over, thousands of victims were murdered, including Archbishop Romero (shot to death in 1980), four U.S. church women (raped and murdered in 1980) and six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter (shot to death at home in 1989). In 1981, an American-trained elite Salvadoran army battalion had slaughtered hundreds of men, women and children in the villages around El Mozote.

By the early 1980s, most forms of popular protest had been brutally and effectively silenced by death squads and government security forces, and many of those active in these opposition groups who had not been captured by the government had fled. The groups that continued to openly oppose government policy were the human rights organizations, such as COMADRES (Committee of Mothers Monsignor Romero). Composed largely of women, many of whom initially could not read or write and had never been politically active, these organizations painstakingly documented case after case of governmental human rights abuses.

In January 1981, the FMLN launched a coordinated military attack across El Salvador, demonstrating an evolution from their first strategy that focused on blowing up bridges, cutting power lines and destroying coffee plantations – efforts to damage the economy which supported



the government. From using machetes and small pistols, the FMLN advanced to grenade launchers and other imported arms and their advances became more strategic and better planned.

Women served in the FMLN as combatants, *colaboradoras* (“collaborators”) and *tenedoras* (“supporters”), many from exile. At the height of the war, women combatants made up nearly 30 percent of the FMLN fighting forces and 40 percent of *tenedores*.

A women-only battalion fought with the FMLN, and the group maintained a training academy in northern El Salvador for women interested in joining the military command. Not all women were in combat; other responsibilities included logistics, radio communications, surveying and mapping, medical care, training in literacy and political education, galvanizing public support and organizing women’s groups in the conflict zones. Collaborators carried mail, produced food, provided clothing and health services, and educated children and adults.

By the late 1980s, both the FMLN and the government recognized the difficulty of securing an outright victory. With U.N. support, a negotiations process was initiated, culminating in the 1992 Chapultepec agreement, comprehensive peace accords with detailed processes for ceasefire, disarmament and demobilization. The peace accords, considered by some the most successful U.N.-brokered agreement in the world today, dictated that the FMLN surrender their weapons to U.N. forces and that 102 Salvadoran officers be dismissed. They also mandated a land transfer program that benefitted more than 35,000 former guerillas and soldiers who fought in the war. The majority of the accords have been followed.

The accords established a truth commission under U.N. auspices to investigate the most serious cases of human rights violations during the war. The commission recommended that those identified as human rights violators be removed from all government and military posts. However, even before the commission’s report was released, the Legislative Assembly granted amnesty for political crimes committed during the war. Among those freed included the Salvadoran Army officers convicted in the murders of the Jesuit priests and the FMLN combatants held for the 1991 murders of two U.S. servicemen.

Today many Salvadorans consider their current situation to be no better now than it was before the civil war. Unemployment is high. Poverty and the proliferation of guns have led to high homicide rates. Lack of environmental protection laws has resulted in pollution, trash and sewage problems. Less than 3 percent of the country remains forested, due to the cultivation of coffee, sugar and cotton.

Today El Salvador’s major industries other than coffee are textiles, sugar, beverages, petroleum, chemicals, fertilizer and textiles. The largest source of income, however, is money sent from Salvadorans who have left the country. Approximately 20 percent of Salvadorans now live abroad.

El Salvador has the highest level of environmental damage in the Americas, leaving its lush, volcanic beauty and the health of its residents in jeopardy. The disastrous flooding from Hurricane Mitch in 1998 was primarily a result of erosion due to deforestation. Many of the country’s river systems suffer from pollution, and some experts fear that at the current rate of destruction, the country will run out of drinking water in less than 15 years.

Politically, however, a power shift is occurring. In 1994, El Salvador held its first elections that included candidates of the FMLN and other parties. In 1997, in El Salvador's second free and open election, the FMLN won 45 percent of the popular vote and leadership of key cities, including San Salvador, thus becoming the second most powerful political party in the country.

In 2009, Mauricio Funes, a television journalist, became the first president from the FMLN party. In his inauguration speech in June, Funes urged unity and reconciliation and committed his government to Archbishop Romero's "preferential option for the poor."



## INTEGRATED TIMELINE

### **Political Developments in El Salvador and *Personal History of Marta Benavides***

<b>Prehistory</b>	Pipil Indians migrate south from Mexico and establish communal, agricultural ways of life.
<b>1524</b>	Spaniard Pedro de Alvarado conquers El Salvador.
<b>1540</b>	Disease and violence reduce the indigenous population from 500,000 to 75,000. Resistance is crushed and El Salvador becomes a Spanish colony.
<b>1821</b>	After uprisings in 1811 and 1814, a junta convened by the captain-general in Guatemala declares independence for its provinces, including El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Chiapas. Indigenous peasants continue to work mainly on communal lands to produce indigo and cocoa for export to Great Britain.
<b>1823</b>	The United Provinces of Central America, which includes El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, gains independence from Mexico. The union dissolves in 1840.
<b>1833</b>	An indigenous uprising is crushed by the new rulers of El Salvador.
<b>1854</b>	A massive earthquake strikes El Salvador.
<b>1859</b>	President Gerardo Barrios introduces coffee growing, which accounts for 95 percent of export earnings.
<b>1881</b>	To free up land for large coffee plantations, the government breaks up indigenous communal lands, eventually abolishing them altogether.
<b>1922</b>	A women's march through the capital, San Salvador, is fired upon by the army and dozens of women die.
<b>1932</b>	A peasant uprising, led by indigenous leaders and Augustín Farabundo Martí, in the western departments of El Salvador is quickly and violently suppressed. An estimated 30,000 indigenous people are killed, including Martí. To avoid further violence, indigenous groups sever their ties to their culture, adopting Western dress and the Spanish language.
<b>1943</b>	<b><i>Marta Benavides is born in San Salvador.</i></b>
<b>1959-1962</b>	<b><i>While in high school, Marta participates in a literacy training program and goes into the countryside to teach reading and writing.</i></b>
<b>1961</b>	The Right-wing National Conciliation Party comes to power after a military coup.

- 1963** *Marta moves to the U.S. to study biology/premed at Eastern Baptist College<sup>2</sup> in Pennsylvania.*
- 1965** *In Philadelphia, Marta works with the Puerto Rican community and in south New Jersey with migrant farm workers, until 1975.*
- Until 1967, Marta plans, writes and hosts a weekly Spanish-language television show on an ABC affiliate in the tri-state area that includes New Jersey. The show provides a Latin perspective on social issues.*
- 1966** *Marta joins the Social Justice Task Force of the New Jersey Council of Churches and serves on various commissions of the U.S. National Council of Churches (NCC), including the Justice, Liberation and Human Fulfillment Commission (also known as the Fifth Commission), which was instrumental in getting the NCC to invite Archbishop Monsignor Óscar Romero, one of El Salvador's most respected Roman Catholic Church leaders, to address the General Assembly of the NCC. It was the first time a Catholic person was to address the body.*
- To further the education and social rights of farm workers, Marta founds Puerto Rican Youth for Action, which also runs a daycare, adult and youth education enrichment programs and the Alma Latina Theater.*
- Until 1985, Marta serves as a member of the executive board of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), a nationwide, broad-based ecumenical coalition which trains communities how to work for their human rights.*
- 1967** *Marta earns a B.A. in Biology and Liberal Arts and receives the Eastern Baptist College achievement award.*
- Marta begins studies at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary<sup>3</sup> in Pennsylvania. She also begins studies in Political Science and Latin American Literature at the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University in Philadelphia.*
- Late 1960s** *Small numbers of political activists, including many women, begin organizing clandestine guerrilla units that would later form the nucleus of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).*
- 1969** *Marta earns her M.A. in Theology/Missions from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary.*
- Driven by issues of land reform and immigration, El Salvador and Honduras engage in a five-day military conflict known as the "Soccer War" because it coincided with the second North American qualifying round for the World Cup. As a result of this armed conflict, the functioning Central American Common Market was dismantled.*

- 1971 *Marta helps create the Third World Coalition of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), which brings together staff, committee members and volunteers to work internally and externally on issues of equality, human rights and peace. She serves as chair at various times.*
- Marta serves on various commissions of AFSC, including the Executive Committee of the Peacebuilding Unit. She was also chair of the Committee on Peacebuilding and Demilitarization. She continued this work until 2008.*
- Marta serves on the executive committee of Agricultural Missions, an international, ecumenical body that supports peoples' rural movements for justice, land rights, food sovereignty and peace. She continues this work until the present time.*
- 1972 *Marta earns an M.A. in Student Personnel Services at Union University in New Jersey through Project Now, a nationwide pilot project to support low-income students entering college and universities.*
- Marta teaches at Glassboro State College and Montclair State College in New Jersey, until 1974.*
- 1973 *For two years, Marta works as one of four program officers for the Department of Higher Education of New Jersey, under the chancellor of higher education, on the newly created Educational Opportunity Fund.*
- Early 1970s In El Salvador, a new spirit of activism emerges from the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council and the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops, in Medellín, Colombia. Progressive young priests organize study sessions in which indigenous people and Christian-based communities reflect on local, national and global conditions in light of biblical texts.
- 1974 *Marta begins post-graduate studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey.*
- 1975 *Marta returns to El Salvador hoping to stay, but violence against people in the social movement forces her to return to the United States.*
- Marta coordinates the Hispanic Theology Project, part of a nationwide Theology in the Americas Project, an expression of liberation theology. She meets leading theologians from the African-American, Hispanic, indigenous and white communities, and women leaders, as well as international theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru. The project lasts until 1978.*
- Marta leads a delegation to the U.N.'s First World Conference on Women in Mexico City.*

- 1976** *To begin doctoral studies in Ministry, Marta returns to Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, where she attends until 1978.*
- Between 1976 and 1980, Marta helps create the U.S. and Canadian movements for solidarity to stop the war in El Salvador and Central America.*
- 1977** *Marta coordinates the National Conference of the Hispanic Theology Project, in San Antonio, Texas.*
- Marta coordinates work with the Latin American Council for Adult Education (CEAAL) and the International Council on Adult Education (ICAE), on issues related to environment, gender and a culture of peace through world forums. She continues this work until the present time.*
- 1978** *Marta is part of the coordinating team that convenes the first National Conference of Theology in the Americas, held in Chicago, Ill.*
- 1979** *Marta is ordained in the American Baptist Church.*
- At the request of Archbishop Monsignor Óscar Romero, Marta returns to El Salvador and directs the Ecumenical Committee for Humanitarian Aid (CEAH), originally while in San Salvador and later from exile in Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Mexico.*
- Until 1983, Marta is chaplain of the El Salvador Student Christian Movement, an affiliate of the World Council of Churches (WCC).*
- 1979-1981** Thirty-four thousand people are killed in politically motivated murders in El Salvador by army-backed, right-wing death squads.
- 1980** January – The Revolutionary Coordinator of the Masses of the Peoples is created and holds a national strike demanding the end of violence and repression. Almost 1 million people march.
- The CEAH opens the first refugee and service centers in El Salvador and creates programs to influence and educate the international community to stop the war in El Salvador. The main support comes from the WCC in Geneva.
- In the United States, again at the request of Monsignor Romero, Marta and leaders of the Theology of the Americas – especially the Methodists Sheila and John Collins and the NCC Fifth Commission – forms the Interreligious Task Force on El Salvador and Central America.*
- March – The Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) is formed, in opposition to the regime.

March 24 – Monsignor Romero is assassinated while celebrating Mass in the small chapel of the Divine Providence Hospital in San Salvador.

March 31 – At the silent march for the funeral of Monsignor Romero, half a million people march and are attacked. Twenty-six mourners are murdered; many disappear and are imprisoned.

June – The National University of El Salvador is taken over by the military, closed and ransacked (books burned, etc.). Many people are detained and imprisoned, and an unknown number are killed. The university starts to work in “exile,” such as off campus and in people’s homes.

July – The Revolutionary Unified Directorate (DRU) of the five revolutionary organizations is formed in order to create the FMLN.

October – The FMLN is officially formed.

November – Leaders of the FDR are kidnapped, tortured and murdered.

November and December – Four U.S. churchwomen are abducted, raped, killed and left in a shallow grave near the capital.

**1981** The FMLN launches a coordinated military attack across the country. El Salvador’s civil war officially begins.

The Salvadoran Army’s Atlacatl Battalion, trained by American advisors, murders hundreds of men, women and children, often by decapitation, in El Mozote and surrounding villages.

The FMLN is recognized by Mexico and France as a legitimate political force. The United Nations grants belligerent status to the FMLN to promote dialogue and negotiation as a political solution to the civil strife.

**1982** *From exile in Mexico, Marta creates and serves as director of the Ecumenical Ministries for Development and Peace (MEDEPAZ), focused on ending the war. This work includes advocating for peace and healing family-level violence and trauma, and violence against the environment. It provides support systems to refugees, especially those in Mexico. Marta serves in MEDEPAZ until 1992.*

**1983** The Salvadoran army begins a counter-insurgency strategy against FMLN rebels.

*With the sponsorship of the British Council of Churches and related movements, Marta travels to the United Kingdom to promote the end of the war in El Salvador and Central America through dialogue and negotiations.*

- 1983** *Marta creates, under the auspices of IFCO, Central American Information Week to educate U.S. citizens to promote legislative support for dialogue and negotiation to stop the war in El Salvador. This work, tailored to citizens in key U.S. states, continues until 1985.*
- 1984** Napoleon Duarte, a U.S.-backed Christian Democrat, is elected president of El Salvador.
- Five Salvadoran national guardsmen are convicted of the 1980 murder of four U.S. churchwomen.
- Talks between the Salvadoran government and opposition organizations, including the FMLN, begin.
- 1985** *The U.K. World Development Movement sponsors Marta to develop a campaign in the United Kingdom for dialogue and negotiation to end the civil strife in El Salvador.*
- Marta leads an ecumenical delegation to the U.N. World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya.*
- 1986** *The Canadian Council of Churches asks Marta to campaign as part of their ongoing nationwide educational program, Ten Days for World Development. The program is entitled “Peace and Justice in the World: Stop the Wars in El Salvador and Central America.”*
- Talks between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN break down.
- An earthquake measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale strikes the middle of San Salvador. An estimated 1,500 people die, 30,000 are injured and 200,000 left homeless.
- 1987** Peace talks resume in San Salvador.
- 1988** *Marta is a member, until 2003, of the executive committee of the board of the South East Regional Economic Justice Network.*
- 1989** The FMLN launches a coordinated military offensive, attacking military centers in major cities. The Salvadoran army bombs residential neighborhoods believed to support the FMLN.
- Marta is a member of a delegation to and a workshop presenter at the assembly of the WCC, and at a follow-up meeting in Zimbabwe.*
- Six Jesuits priests, their housekeeper and her daughter are shot at the Jesuit residence at the University of Central America in San Salvador.



**1990** Under U.N. auspices, the Salvadoran government and FMLN agree to begin serious negotiations to end the civil war through political means.

**1991** *Marta begins partnering and cooperating with the Women's Environment and Development Organization, founded and at the time led by Bella Abzug.*

*Marta returns to El Salvador and establishes the International Institute for Cooperation Amongst Peoples, or Feria Siglo XXIII (Institute for the 23rd Century), which creates programs for all people to practice the values of a culture of peace.*

*July – Under the auspices of the Program to Combat Racism of the WCC, Marta helps create the First International Conference on Columbus' Arrival in the Americas. Representatives of indigenous people of the Americas and African movements for liberation discuss the impact of colonialism in their history and lives.*

*October – Marta takes two indigenous delegations from El Salvador to the Mexican government-sponsored International Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.*

At midnight on December 31, an agreement is signed at the United Nations in New York by the Salvadoran government and the FMLN, leading to a cease-fire and peace accord ending the 12-year civil war.

**1992** The peace accord is officially signed at Chapultepec, Mexico. The document contains detailed processes for a cease-fire, disarmament and demobilization. A cease-fire begins and the United Nations sets up operations in El Salvador to insure implementation of the accords.

*With the British Council of Churches, Marta creates a program to explore the history of slavery as an enterprise and how slavery impacts people in today's world.*

*At the U.N. Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Marta helps create and negotiate the International Treaty for Environmental Education for Sustainable Communities and Global Environmental Responsibility, which is still being used worldwide. The treaty is the result of a coordinated and cooperative effort between the U.N Commission on Sustainable Development and its social movements, the ICAE, based in Toronto and a member of the U.N. Economic and Social Council, and the Latin American Council on Adult Education.*

*Marta presents in Maastricht, Netherlands, at a meeting discussing a treaty on trade – part of the process in the creation of the European Union.*

*Marta creates the U.S. conference of social movements of South East USA, sponsored by the Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation, of which she is a member of the executive committee.*

*Marta takes an indigenous delegation from El Salvador to the Mexican government-sponsored meeting of the Mayan Route, in Campeche, Yucatán.*

*October – Marta takes a Salvadoran delegation to Ecuador for the International Encounter of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas (not government-sponsored).*

The U.N.'s Commission on the Truth for El Salvador begins investigating acts of violence committed during El Salvador's civil war.

**1993**

U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali states the Salvadoran government is not in compliance with the Peace Accords.

*In Nahuizalco, Sonsonate, Marta opens the Ecological House where she provides trainings on ecology and conflict transformation. Her program in support of indigenous grandmothers also begins.*

In advance of the publication of the findings of the U.N. truth commission, the Salvadoran government announces an amnesty program for political crimes committed before the war ended. The report names top Salvadoran military officers who ordered the killing of the Jesuits in 1989.

*Marta launches restoration efforts to create the educational Permaculture Farm at her family's farm outside San Salvador.*

**1994**

El Salvador holds the first elections that include candidates representing the FMLN and other opposition parties. The Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party wins the presidency after a run-off and holds a majority in the National Assembly. The FMLN emerges as the country's second political force.

*Marta presents at Nelson Mandela's celebration of the People's Movements for Liberation, in South Africa.*

**1995**

*At the U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, China, Marta creates many of the workshops of the Parallel Forum and works on language negotiations at the official level. In Beijing, CNN, in cooperation with Jane Fonda's Environmental Project, launches the film "Scratching the Imagination," which features Marta's work on peace and reconstruction in El Salvador.*

*In Copenhagen, Denmark, Marta works on language negotiations in the civil society forum of the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development.*

- 1996** In the second election since the end of El Salvador's civil war, the FMLN wins 45 percent of the National Assembly and mayorships in key cities, including San Salvador.
- Marta studies Feminist Theology at the San Francisco Theological Seminary in California.*
- Marta is part of a women's delegation to the U.N. Food Sovereignty and Security Summit, in Rome, Italy. The CNN documentary on Marta's work related to food security is screened at the summit.*
- Marta participates in a women's delegation to the U.N. Micro-credit Summit in Washington, D.C. The CNN documentary on Marta's work is screened, presenting a solution to economic problems.*
- 1997** *At the Bioneers conference, which promotes solutions for the world's environmental issues, Marta speaks and is named an "Environmental Ambassador."*
- 1998** Hurricane Mitch devastates El Salvador and much of Central America.
- The Resourceful Women Award is presented to Marta and women from many countries, in recognition of their work for social transformation.*
- 1999** *Until 2001, Marta participates in the U.N. process leading to the Summit for Financing for Development. She is part of the feminist task force.*
- 2000** *Marta is part of a women's delegation to the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development, also known as Copenhagen +5, in Geneva, Switzerland.*
- Marta co-founds Education Networking for Latin American Cooperation and Empowerment (ENLACE), which promotes global social networks' participation at the United Nations and other social forums.*
- Marta founds the Salvadoran Coalition for the International Criminal Court (ICC), part of the Central American Coalition for the ICC.*
- In Chile, the Letter of the Americas is signed. It is an agreement by all governments of the American continent including the Caribbean not to recognize a coup d'état ever again.
- 2001** January – The government of El Salvador, by decree, dollarizes the Salvadoran economy.
- An earthquake leaves at least 1,200 people dead and more than a million homeless.

*January to September – In the biggest encampment in the nation, the Cafetalon, Marta works with the victims of the earthquake.*

**2002** *Marta serves as a member of the executive board of the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee, until 2008.*

*Marta participates in a women's delegation to the U.N. World Summit on Sustainable Development, or Rio +10, in Johannesburg, South Africa.*

*Marta first presents and participates in World Social Forums, and continues to the present.*

**2003** *Three-hundred-and-sixty Salvadoran troops are dispatched to Iraq.*

*El Salvador agrees to a free trade agreement with the United States.*

*Marta receives the U.N. prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life.*

*Marta leads a delegation from the AFSC to the first Americas Social Forum in Quito, Ecuador.*

*Marta begins teaching courses in a culture of peace at Millersville University in Pennsylvania. She teaches there until 2006.*

**2004** *Marta receives the Horton Chair award from the Highlander Center in Tennessee.*

**2005** *The human rights court of the Organization of American States votes to reopen an investigation into the 1981 massacre in El Mozote.*

*Thousands flee as the Ilamatepec volcano, also known as Santa Ana, erupts.*

*Scores of people are killed as Tropical Storm Stan hits the country.*

*Along with five other Salvadoran women, Marta is part of 1,000 peace women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.*

*Marta is a presenter at the tri-country meeting on water, at Iguazu, Brazil.*

*At the second Americas Social Forum, in Caracas, Venezuela, Marta leads an international women's delegation on women, peace and U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325.*

**2006** *Marta founds the Culture is Peace Center and the AHA Museum in El Salvador to educate citizens about global and planetary citizenship.*

*As a result of her work on peace, gender and the environment, Marta is named a Goodwin-Niering Fellow at Connecticut College.*

*Marta is a presenter on sustainability and spirituality at the Ibero-American Conference on Environmental Education in Brazil.*

**2007** *Marta chairs a delegation of the Third World Coalition to present at the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta, Ga.*

*The 23rd Century International Free University for Peace is established by Marta. Participants meet monthly to discuss social, economic and environmental issues and promote the Slow Food Movement.*

**2008** *January – Marta coordinates and organizes the creation of the first Salvadoran Social Forum at the University of Salvador in San Salvador. She does this in the context and within the principles of the World Social Forum and as a counterpart to the World Economic Forum that meets in Davos, Switzerland each year.*

*At the U.N. Meeting on Financing for Development, in Doha, Qatar, Marta participates with the feminist task force. She negotiates the creation of the U.N. Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and its Impact on Development.*

*Marta leads a Salvadoran delegation and a workshop at the third Americas Social Forum in Guatemala City.*

**2009** *January – Marta is a presenter on environmental emergencies and the Treaty for Sustainability, at the World Social Forum in Belém do Pará, Brazil.*

*March – Mauricio Funes, a television journalist, runs for president under the FMLN party and wins elections. He is sworn in on June 1.*

*June – Marta participates in People's Voices, civil society hearings on the global financial and economic crisis, in New York as part of the U.N. Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development. She is part of the women's working group on financing for development.*

*July – At the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Marta is part of a meeting of Latin American experts on the impact of the economy and financial crisis on gender. The meeting is sponsored by the government of Mexico.*

*September – Marta participates in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, in San Diego, Calif.*

*October – Marta helps organize and presents a pilot project on people discerning the environmental crisis and economic sustainability in Harrisburg, Penn.*

## **NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARTA BENAVIDES**

### **In the Garden**

Hummingbirds wake Marta Benavides every morning before the sun rises. Drawn by sweetness and rich colors in the garden, they flit near Marta's open window, arousing her from sleep with the *deet, deet, deet* of their beating wings.

Looking out on the garden, Marta offers gratitude to many: the Great Creator Spirit, Monsignor Oscar Romero, her mother Eva and her father Teodoro. The last house of her parents is now the home of their four daughters. It was built so the gardens are everywhere – inside and out, around every nook and cranny. Her mother did the planting – the bougainvillea here, the avocado tree there – every flower intentionally chosen and planted, the way it has been since Marta was a little girl. Among her early memories is of the jasmine her mother trained around the bedroom windows so the aroma would pervade the dreams of the sleeping family. “I start every day with the image of my mother and her garden, and the birds doing what is needed to create a healthy planet and the enjoyment of life,” Marta says. “I start every day with happiness.”<sup>4</sup>

Marta's parents were of indigenous heritage, and they made a striking couple. Her father was a dark, tall, slender man who worked for the government. Teodoro was born in the east, in San Miguel. Eva was light, shorter, with a pretty face, born in the west – in Sonsonate. Both were descendants of the Mayas who first settled in El Salvador around 1000 A.D. Marta remembers her father as the studious, logical, thoughtful one, and Eva as the parent with high-spirited convictions. Eva was the guiding light, Marta remembers, and “my father was always behind her, supporting her. He was very humble in that sense.”

Early in their marriage, Teodoro and Eva lost their first child, a son, when he was only a month old, because they were too far from the city to get help. In the seven years that followed there were no children. Eva grieved – and she prayed for a daughter. “She promised that if she had a daughter, she would teach her to serve humanity.” When their first baby girl was born, the biblical name Marta was selected purposefully – to represent commitment, duty and capability.

When I was little and I would fight with my sisters, she would say, ‘You have to be an example to them. You are supposed to care for them, to be a good girl.’ And I would say, ‘But mama, I don’t want to be a good girl. I want to be a bad girl. I want to fight with my sisters.’ And she would just laugh and remind me about the reason that we are on the planet: for the enjoyment of life and service.

When Marta was born in San Salvador, the capital, her parents lived in a very small apartment. Immediately, Eva started a garden for the tiny space. El Salvador's tropical sun nurtures an abundance of beautiful vines, shrubs and flowers that grow easily from cuttings. From neighbors and friends, Marta's mother gathered up small branches and single stems, snips of this and that. She had no pots of her own, so she used the empty cans of powdered milk (they could not afford fresh milk), which made perfect containers for her cuttings. Over time, inside and outside the apartment, flowers in reds and purples came alive and vines curled to the floor.

As the family moved from the apartment to a house, Eva created her beautiful garden outside. Marta remembers her always singing while doing her chores – weeding, trimming or seeking out a particular plant for a healing potion or tea. The garden was Eva’s pharmacy and her platform for teaching. In it she introduced Marta and her three younger sisters to lessons in mindfulness, creation and healing. She pointed out the medicinal and cooking plants and explained their usages. And when the special day to celebrate teachers came, the Benavides girls always took plants they had grown as their gifts. “Our mother said, ‘You take something you have done or taken care of.’”

Marta and her three younger sisters had daily household tasks. Marta’s was to water the garden and sweep up the spent blossoms after school. She remembers one day a man came to the door. “He said, ‘I followed the scent for a few blocks. That’s how I found your house.’”

Inside the beauty of her garden, Marta’s mother revealed and taught. She wanted her daughters to understand relationships, healthy living, caring for others. There was a way to be and a way not to be. She reached for a word from Nahuatl, the language the indigenous people of El Salvador were forbidden to speak by the colonizers. “My mother would say, ‘Don’t be a *chirajo*.’ A *chirajo* is a rag – don’t be a rag-like person.” In other words, don’t be a weak person, someone without character.



Slamming doors and screams from the house next door awakened Marta. Quickly, she climbed out of bed. She found her parents standing at the front door, watching a family come unhinged. The Benavides had only recently purchased this home and moved into the neighborhood; from what they knew, this family – husband, wife and small children – were quiet and friendly. The Benavides also knew, like everyone else in the neighborhood, that this had been payday, the honored time for local men to drop their wages at the bar. Payday and drinking added up to domestic violence in 15-day intervals throughout the country.

The man from next door was drunk and armed, yelling and waving his pistol. His children were screaming. In her nightgown, his wife ran away from him, first inside their home, then to the street and finally to Eva’s garden and straight through to Eva and Teodoro’s door. They stepped aside to let her in. The drunken man screamed at Marta’s father. In his inebriated haze, the drunk man charged that Teodoro must be sleeping with his wife – why else would he open his door to her?

But what she was running to was the sanctuary that Eva and Teodoro had created together. That night, while the rest of the neighbors pretended not to notice anything out of the ordinary, Teodoro kept his armed neighbor at bay and his family safe. Inside, Eva tended to the distraught woman and her children, and in the morning the woman returned to her home.

As the months passed, the children of the drunk man often ended up eating dinner with Marta and her family and sometimes falling asleep on their sofa. Late in the evening, their babysitter would come to retrieve them, making sure their father never knew where his children spent so much of their time. The family never really befriended the Benavides – the family with the open door, the extra places at the table, the extra blankets and pillows for their children. Marta’s mother summed the situation up in a few words. “It’s a tough thing. They are not bad,

they just do not know any better yet.” Or, who are we to judge? We can’t know everything. It’s complicated.



While Marta was growing up, men made the decisions in El Salvador. It was not uncommon for men to treat their wives as property, with no excuses. But her father was not such a man. He didn’t drink with the neighborhood men or boss his wife around. In many ways he and Eva were a modern couple making decisions together, and as such they were scorned. The neighbors gossiped: “Who wears the pants in that family?”

Teodoro didn’t have time for vices. He had things to do with his hard-earned wages. He paid the rent and took care of his four daughters, his mother and other relatives and all the people who came to their door for assistance.

His passion was reading. Once a month he took Marta to the bookstore, *Libreria Ercilla*, where he purchased one book for himself, one for Eva and one for Marta. As the oldest, Marta was instructed to enjoy her book and then share it with her sisters. One time he purchased maps and an atlas. After dinner on so many evenings, with jasmine scent wafting through the windows, Teodoro would open the atlas on the living room floor and gather his children around him, pointing out El Salvador and San Salvador. He would show the girls their neighbors – Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico – and beyond: New York City and Canada and Brazil and Paris. He wanted them to learn the scope of the world and their own place in it. One Sunday a month, Teodoro and Marta went together to take books to prisoners in jail.

When Marta was 5 she started kindergarten at a small private Baptist school, selected by her parents because it was better than the public school, affordable and close by. The other men in the neighborhood took off together for work, but Teodoro chose to walk his eldest daughter to her class every day. It was a trip through farmers’ fields separated by fences.

One morning after a stormy night, Teodoro paused at a muddy puddle. “What do you see, Tita?” he asked, using the nickname that only he used.

Marta answered, “There’s a frog there.”

He said, “What is it doing?”

“It’s jumping in the *charco*, the puddle of water.”

“Do you think the frog can fly?”

She shook her head and said, “No.”

He held her chin and looked into her eyes. “Well, remember the frog does what she is supposed to do in the universe, and you must respect her. But you are not a frog – and you can fly.”

Marta protested, “But I don’t have wings, papa.”



He smiled and brought his face closer to hers. “But you have your imagination, and that is as good as wings.”

Marta credits all she envisions to her mother and father. “I am so grateful for them. My soul was nourished by their insights and care.”



When Marta was 7 years old, a family that lived next door to them hired a girl from the rural area to work in the household as a maid. The family had two sons; the youngest would grow up to be a leader in the notorious death squads that would terrorize Salvadorans during the armed conflict beginning in the late ‘70s.

Late one night, the oldest son, about 15 years old, went to the young girl’s room and raped her. The next morning, the girl – bruised and humiliated – told the parents what their son had done. Marta remembers that the reaction was swift and violent. They swore and labeled her a whore, and the father beat her up and kicked her out of the house, penniless, with no possible way to return home.

But at the back door of Marta’s house stood Eva, with her hands out to hold and comfort the traumatized girl. Eva and her daughters did what they always did: provide healing soups, shelter and safety. In this case, they also helped the girl find a way home.

Perhaps the young girl’s story had a hopeful ending, but for the Benavides the incident created new problems. Their backdoor neighbors mounted a campaign of insults and name calling that affected not just the adults of the family but Marta and her sisters as well. Marta learned at an early age that classist societies adhere to a strict pecking order – you don’t acknowledge those who are in a social class considered below yours, and you treat those who do help them as “lower class people.” The hallmark of Salvadoran society centered on the idea that to be someone, you had to put somebody down. Marta watched this scenario play out time and again in her neighborhood. “This was the result of ignorance,” her mom and dad would say; it was still one of the legacies of the conquest and colonization of El Salvador.

As the Benavides continued to help anyone who needed it – for example, becoming the godparents of the child of an indigenous couple who sold charcoal door-to-door – they faced more ridicule and disdain. From an early age, the lessons in discrimination and its harmful ways were part of Marta’s life. In a religiously intolerant country,<sup>5</sup> once Marta became a Protestant she was harassed with rocks, garbage and hot water, all hurled at her at one time or another. The neighbors would sit on the fence and call, “Come here and open your mouth. I have to pee in there.”

On another occasion, the women of the neighborhood joined a priest in creating a charity project called the Cup of Milk League. The idea was to go into the impoverished barrio once a month to give a glass of milk to the hungry children. Marta’s mother was invited to go, and she did – once.

The league women wore new dresses, high heels and fancy hairdos and got their pictures taken by the local newspaper that was publishing a story about their good deeds. None of this sat

well with Eva, who came home and pronounced the event a “vanity of vanity.” She made it clear to her daughters that there was a difference between pretension and supporting others, and that those who were more interested in their hairdos might as well stay home. After Eva’s refusal to join the league, the women of the neighborhood had more reason to dislike her, and even the priest viewed her with disdain.

The family coped by continuing to be who they were and not letting the neighbors’ opinions interfere in the ways they knew were right. Others might have come to the conclusion that all human nature was bad, but Eva instilled in her family patience and a belief that situations could change – especially if some day people were able to live in better conditions, without struggling so much. Eva always told her daughters that the neighbors didn’t know any better – yet. And she emphasized the *yet*. She reminded them, “You cannot ask for oranges from the mango tree” – and challenged them to work to create the conditions for a new society.

At home, the table was frequently set to accommodate the impoverished or older people her mother knew could use a good meal. Neither of Marta’s parents had use for traditional Salvadoran classicist thinking that kept people in their own class separated from each other. “I grew up knowing that people help each other, and also how hard impoverished people worked to meet their needs.”

In the ‘80s, when the civil war came, Marta drew her convictions from these examples.

When my mom, dad and sisters got confused and worried about the danger of me getting killed, imprisoned or disappeared because of my involvement in the civil strife, I would remind them that this was something I was taught from the time I was little and they needed to support me – even if that meant suffering for them and death for me.



The Benavides were also different than their neighbors because of their connection to the land. Eva was from the Cordillera del Balsamo, part of a mountain range that stretches like a rope from Alaska to Patagonia and named for the balsam tree that is milked in the same way as maple trees to extract the precious balm and salve. So treasured was balsam, ships loaded with it in the Pacific – colonizer ships bound for Europe – called it balsam of Peru to confuse pirates. Pirate’s booty at the time: gold, silver and balsam.

The family traveled to Eva’s home once a year. It was a long trip by bus, truck, oxcart, horseback, climbing and walking. They took gifts Eva had collected all year – medicines, toys and warm clothing – and stayed with relatives and friends in the simple houses of the indigenous people. They got up early in the morning, drinking in the fresh, crisp air, and stayed up late telling stories under dark velvet skies. From the vantage point of the silvery mountains, Marta could see why the indigenous people called their land *Cuzcatlán* – “Land of Riches and Jewels.” From there they could see the Pacific at sunset, shining like a pearl, and Marta got a sense of all that had been lost. “When I was growing up, to call it Cuzcatlán was a terrible thing to do because the government needed so much to repress our culture. You could be persecuted for that.”

While among her people, Eva taught her daughters by example to respect the peasants and indigenous people who lived in deep poverty, feeding themselves from meager crops they grew on tiny scraps of land. Eva told them that the impoverished people – discriminated against and marginalized for hundreds of years, since colonial times – were honest, hard-working and deserved respect. They were the true owners of the land.

By the early 1950s, Eva and Teodoro had saved enough money to buy a small piece of land, the *granja*, for themselves outside San Salvador. It became the family's weekend garden. Marta and her sisters protested about having to get up so early to walk for an hour and take the trolley, and then walk even more, but by the time they reached the beautiful Tomayate River,<sup>6</sup> their spirits would be flying. The girls would play in the river, buy vegetables from the local people for their dinner, then walk a little farther to the farm. Over seasons and years, the family composted, planted and cared for plants and animals. On the hilly plot, they learned erosion-prevention techniques and created water filtering systems to cleanse the water and protect the water table, while creating a lung for greater San Salvador, and a community with their peasant neighbors as well.

Later, when she returned from exile in 1991, Marta began teaching these skills to survivors who were returning to lands ravaged by a decade of bombings and strife. Her base was the Ecological House she founded in Nahuizalco, in the region of her mother's homeland, in a rented house she renovated. Today it remains a showcase for low-cost possibilities for improvement and sustainable practices, with recycling displays, water purification systems using sunlight and recycled bottles, and low-maintenance and medicinal gardens. And, there are two balsam trees.<sup>7</sup>

And the family farm outside San Salvador has become the Permaculture Farm near the city. It is still in the family and is dedicated to teaching lessons of soil and water conservation and management. It's a place where students and families can bring picnics and learn about birds and butterflies, water and soil conservation and management, biodiversity and U.N. Agenda 21.<sup>8</sup> Schoolchildren, university students and foreign visitors come to work, enjoy and learn Marta's ecological philosophies in action. Her basic principles are combined here: frugality, sustainability – using only the basics combined with vision and imagination. “We're creating the resources needed to satisfy the needs, to keep people healthy for now and in the future, and to keep the planet healthy.”

In 1989, Marta contributed a chapter for a feminist theology book, *Inheriting Our Mother's Gardens*, a collection of eight personal histories written by women theologians of African, Asian, Anglo-American and Latin-American descent. Marta wrote “My Mother's Garden is the New Creation,” inspired by the vision of Isaiah. “This garden teaches us about oneness amongst peoples and with the planet, the restoration of the balance, reconciliation. The whole of the planet is a garden,” Marta wrote, “and provides a way to cultivate and heal the world to live the abundant life.” It is from her experiences and learning from her mom and dad that she had developed her vision, philosophy and understandings for the vision she expressed in that chapter.

Gardening is visioning, dreaming and futuring for me too. It is to envision and bring about the new creation, the new earth, right here and now. For the Salvadorans, God's new earth will restore the garden of the people, which

flourished before the landowners kept people from planting their corn, vegetables and beans to make room for the profit-making coffee, cotton and sugar. Only when we stand together will the flowers of justice and humanity grow. Only then will all people be truly free to make the global garden their home.



One family in Marta's neighborhood had a turn of extreme good fortune, followed by the worst of times. The husband, part of the Salvadoran embassy, was transferred to Madrid, Spain. The whole family went with pride for being able to participate in such rare travel and position. But when the Salvadoran government changed a few years later, it was time to come home. The husband sent his family ahead to get established back in the neighborhood and he would follow later. He returned, however, not to his old neighborhood, but set up house with a woman he brought with him from Spain.

The wife's pain was of staggering proportions. Like so many others in the neighborhood she sought solace with Eva. Marta remembers that her mother always tried to keep her daughters away from the most intimate conversations, but they knew the outlines of the story and could see the agony in the wife's face.

One day the woman hanged herself in the bathroom shower. Her mother and children were away, but when the mother returned and peeked through the bathroom window, she saw her daughter hanging lifeless and began screaming for help. Soon the entire neighborhood was in great panic and turmoil. Someone went to fetch Eva, and Marta came too. She remembers that her mother didn't hesitate for a moment, but climbed the wall and through the window, cut the woman loose and stretched her out on the ground where she laid still and purple. In the terror of the moment, Eva remained calm, talking to her and trying to revive her with gentle strokes. Soon she began to breathe again in short, labored gasps. When she was strong enough, Eva took her home.

Over the next weeks, Eva told the woman to think of her children, that this no-good-husband of hers was not the end of the world and that you cannot force someone to love you. Slowly, Eva brought her back to wellness. Eva and the woman remained friends all their lives.<sup>9</sup>

But while Eva was nursing her back to health, Marta found out where the husband worked and sought him out one afternoon after school. She was upset that this man had caused so much pain for his family, and she told him so. He answered that she was much too young to know what was going on. Marta responded, "Yes, I must be too young because I cannot understand how you can leave your family and cause so much distress."



One day when she was 7, Marta came home from school with her teachers, who had invited her to attend the Baptist Sunday School. It had taken only a short time for school administrators to pinpoint Marta as an exceptional student and determine it would be good to recruit her for the Baptist Church. Eva and Teodoro were Catholic, although Marta remembers them as being connected more to spiritual beliefs than the orthodoxy of any religion. They

picked Marta's Baptist school for practical reasons rather than religious ones. Many of the families made the same choice for the same reason.

Eva and Teodoro asked Marta how she felt about going. She was excited and curious, and so they allowed it. Right away, Marta liked the services that were conducted in Spanish rather than Latin and made more sense to her. She especially liked the Bible studies.

One Sunday morning, Marta heard the story of Adam and Eve (in Spanish, *Eva*) and their disaster in the Garden of Eden. Afterward, Marta rushed home, found her mother and clung to her skirts, begging, "You have to change your name. You cannot be called Eva any more."

Eva wanted to know what could possibly be the matter. So Marta told her what she had just learned: that Eve had caused Adam to commit sin in the Garden of Eden. God had kicked everyone out of paradise because of her.

Eva took her oldest daughter by the hand and walked her out into the garden. She gestured to the orange tree covered with blossoms and thick with fragrance, to the bougainvillea, and at the hummingbirds and butterflies, the mango and limes. "Don't you see that we *are* in paradise." Humans, she said, had never been deprived of heaven on earth. Paradise could be experienced everyday by everyone in a "garden," so we must educate everyone and take care of it and not allow ourselves to leave or get out of "paradise."

It was a lesson Marta would never forget.

Later in my life I realized that she was right. At the time I thought she didn't know any better because she only went to third grade. I felt sorry for her. But now I know the Great Loving Creator of life would never punish his or her children by kicking them out of paradise. My mom was issuing the same biblical challenge that brother Jesus was in the New Testament, "You have heard that it is said, but I say unto you ...". She was teaching me to think, to develop a critical mind, to discern and not just follow, and to take a stand and live it. All these experiences and guidance created the basis for character formation, for integrity and for moral strength.

José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, said that when you make a choice, it is not you making the choice; it is your character. Marta continues:

Whatever choice one makes, it is one's character that will be weakened or strengthened by the choice one makes. It is not about being correct; it is about what your character is guiding you to choose and do. If you make a mistake, you can go back and fix it. The important thing is that you go through the best of you to make a choice.

At times in my life when things have been difficult, I always knew I had to honor character. It was my parents who taught me this and developed my integrity and character.

### **Faith**

When Marta turned 11 and graduated from the neighborhood school, a big decision had to be made. Where would she continue her education? For some time the school's director had been encouraging Marta to attend a Baptist boarding school two hours away in Santa Ana, El Salvador's second largest city. Marta began to favor that idea.

It took some convincing, but in time Eva and Teodoro agreed, too. One reason was safety. If Marta stayed at home, she would have to take buses alone to the girls' school in downtown San Salvador. It was too risky a proposition. In that time (and through to this day), decisions in the country were always made with consideration for safety.

The school building in Santa Ana was two stories and built around a beautiful courtyard. Surrounding it were gardens and fields with mango trees. The boarding students lived on the second floor in 14 big rooms in one wing; the rest of the building was used for the school. The boarding students, all girls, came from all over the country and from all economic situations. Some were extremely impoverished. The school, the Colegio Bautista, was also attended by non-boarding co-ed students from the local area.

The boarding students were kept to a strict regimen. They went to bed at 9 and got up at 5 to face a cold shower. Each student had a bed, a place at the dinner table, a small closet. Marta was homesick her first year and pleaded to come home, but Eva decided she should stay, and by the end of the first year Marta had gained her footing – and a scholarship.

She earned the title “the girl of the medals,” winning awards for best achievement in math, science and for best grade point average. Part of her success derived from her joy in reading. Her tradition when she received her textbooks was not to wait for the chapter-to-chapter assignments, but to devour the whole, cover to cover. She never considered herself more intelligent than the other students; she simply loved to learn new things and apply herself.

On Sundays, she put on the white “church” uniform with its big collar, stripes and a tie around the neck, and walked through the fields and streets with the other students to the Baptist church, with its wide latch windows. The students sat in wooden benches reserved for them. The lessons she heard concerned hell and sinners. She felt the increasing pressure by the church to bring her parents into the fold, so they too could be assured a place in heaven. Her stomach tossed with the idea that her beautiful parents and sisters would be condemned to suffer for eternity in hell.

Troubled and restless, she woke at 4 o'clock one morning, went outside in the darkness and called to God: “OK, I don't know what's going to happen, but my parents are not going to come into this church. I love them too much to separate myself from them. So I'm choosing to go to hell with them.”

As soon as the words were out of her mind, Marta felt a calm flow through her. She marveled that no one came after her and no terrible things happened, even though she dared to challenge God. Marta learned then the limitation of religious teachings and that God was bigger than she was being told.



Marta was elected president of the church's Youth Society, which met on Sunday afternoons to do what she considered superficial activities. As president she was ready to bring a little more seriousness to the meetings, to plan things that would help the students prepare for the future. She had been watching at the library as the girls went in giggling to leave messages hidden in books for their boyfriends. She lived with some of these girls and knew many had very little understanding of what it meant to be in a relationship.

Years earlier, Teodoro and Eva had taken the occasion of a teenage pregnancy in the neighborhood to explain to their daughters everything they needed to know about sexuality, the female body and pregnancy. The unwed teen in the neighborhood had been beaten up and kicked out by her family. Marta's parents assured their daughters that that would not happen to them. On the other hand, should one of the Benavides girls get pregnant, life would not be easy. Eva told them, "You will have your baby and you will have to study at night and work during the day to take care of that baby."

Believing that her fellow students needed truthful information, Marta invited two members of the church, a male doctor (a deacon of the church) and a female doctor, to the next meeting to talk about sexuality and pregnancy. The meeting was very successful and a great deal of information was exchanged.

But Marta soon was called in by the Baptist deacons to tell her that her services as president were no longer required. By broaching such a forbidden topic and bringing it openly to the students, Marta had incurred their wrath. She didn't mind. She knew her parents would have approved and that she approved. No one should be kept in the dark. Marta decided not to leave, but to spend the rest of her time in the group helping the new president plan meaningful programs for discernment and action. No pressure was put on the male doctor, but terrible things were said of the moral standing of the young female doctor, also a member of the church. For Marta this experience was a very clear expression of the moral and sexist practices of the church, which she experienced over and over again throughout her life, not only in her country but in the United States as well. It was also very clearly a matter of justice, and thus an issue of peace.



At Christmastime when she was 16, Marta was on a bus heading to Mexico City. She and five university students, all men, had been chosen to participate in a congress held by the international Union of Latin American Evangelicals Youth (ULAJE). The bus had started in Panama, picking up participating students throughout Central America. It took three days on the bus to reach Mexico City.

In El Salvador, Marta remembers, Protestants (commonly called evangelicals) were definitely in the minority to the reigning Catholic Church. Only the Baptist church had any significant membership; Marta didn't even know that other faiths – Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists – even existed. But at the congress all these faiths and more were represented by young college students from South America, the Caribbean, Canada, the United States and Europe.

Her eyes and ears were opened. There was a frenzy of excited discussion of human rights issues. The Mexicans heatedly discussed land rights for peasants and the constitutionally protected *ejidos* – the communally held lands, a heritage from the indigenous practices, which the government was taking away in violation of the law. The Jamaicans and Canadians debated their colonial relationship with England; at the time, Canada's legal name was the Dominion of Canada. The problems of colonialism dominated the discussion by the Puerto Ricans. Caribbean students discussed racism, while Bolivians, Ecuadorians and Peruvians brought the issues of indigenous peoples' histories and rights and how their situation as second-class citizens affected each nation as a whole. Marta listened avidly and made friends with students from other countries and faiths.

As Marta participated in the congress, her fellow Salvadorans watched with worry and fear. One day they took her aside and demanded she stop mingling with these dancing, smoking, drinking *rojos* – reds. At home, everyone who fought for their rights was labeled red, or Communist, and bad things happened to all so-called Communists. Massacres of entire villages had been done in the name of wiping out Communists. The young men told Marta she would be personally responsible if anything terrible happened to them when they returned home. Marta chose to meet with her new friends in less public places, outside the Salvadorans' attention.

When the group returned home, Marta and the young men prepared individual reports to share at church services. Marta stood with them in front of the worship service in silent amazement as these young men together reported her activities. They told the congregation she had consorted with Lutherans, Methodists and other suspect groups. Her actions, they claimed, had put them all in danger. The young men sat down and Marta was not allowed to speak at all. The minister, missionary and deacons did not intercede because they also classified people as reds.

Marta, however, was not silenced forever. Other more open-minded church members sought her out and were interested in what she had seen and learned. She told them she did not regret her actions. She told them how important and meaningful it was for her to have visited Mexico, to meet so many people of so many points of view from different ethnic, social, economic, political, cultural and religious backgrounds, and to see young women voicing and defending their positions, creating meaning and knowledge, and feeling and acting powerful in their own right. "One must not be afraid to have one's feet on earth," she said. And she didn't even mind that she was never invited to ULAJE again.



Marta raised her hand.

Who in the classroom was interested in teaching literacy? At 17, Marta was.

Representatives from the Ministry of Education had come to Marta's school, offering the students an opportunity to be trained in teaching literacy. After the training, the students would be able to go into the rural areas and impoverished communities to teach peasants to read and write.



At the time the illiteracy rate in El Salvador was at least 60 percent. For decades the military dictatorship had prioritized keeping order over literacy. But literacy training was gaining new prominence because of a U.N. program encouraging all nations to teach their citizens to read and write. The Salvadoran government agreed to participate and sent Ministry of Education representatives to the high schools to recruit volunteers. Marta and a few of her friends embraced the idea.

Marta received two weeks of training but no teaching materials. She heard a refrain that would become common to her ears throughout her life: “Our country is poor. We don’t have the money for materials. But you are creative people, you will figure it out.” Once the training was completed, the students were on their own. There was no effort to organize them or send them to areas where their new skills could be put to good use.

Marta began at her school. In the beginning, the school director resisted her idea of an evening training because somebody would have to pay for the electricity required to keep the lights on at night. Marta said she would figure that out, and she conducted her first two-week training there as the school year was ending.

Once the term finished, she dispatched herself to a nearby village to begin teaching impoverished coffee workers and their families the lessons she had learned. She traveled by bus, passing rows of crowded huts strung along highways and rivers – on whatever land was left after the large landowners had taken the best for themselves during the conquest and colonial times. At the time, the wealthiest 2 percent of the population owned 60 percent of the land, and most peasants had no land at all.

When she arrived, Marta saw the peasants’ one-room huts with thatch for walls and roofs and dirt floors – no windows, no doors. There was no water, electricity or sanitation facilities. The people used kerosene for light and wood for cooking, and they found a place for her to sleep on a small folding bed in the tiny Catholic church. “One kick,” she remembers, “and anyone could have knocked down that door.” That first night as bats flew over her, in order to sleep she placed her life in the hands of God.

When Marta came to teach the first lesson, the women were sitting on tree stumps nursing their babies. Bats darted in the smoky kerosene light. There were no blackboards. No tables. No chairs. It was futile to think that in these conditions anyone could be taught to read. And Marta knew it. Rather than panic, she turned to what she knew best: her mother’s lessons. As Eva had taught her, Marta respected the impoverished people in front of her and viewed them as the backbone of society. “My parents taught me impoverished people were not poor. They had been made to live in poverty. They were picking the coffee the rich people were selling in Europe and the United States.”

As she observed the peasants, she found more to admire. No matter how tired and hungry they were, they showed up every night eager to learn. But she also saw there was precious little relief from work in the village. The men drank or went to cock fights; the women stayed home or chatted with neighbors. Seeing this, Marta decided to turn her lesson time into a circle for community, laughter and fun.

She explained to her group of eager students that trying to teach them to read and write was too difficult in these circumstances. She said that reading was not just learning the alphabet and being able to sound out words. Real literacy, she told them, was being able to receive information, create opinions and express yourself. That would need to wait for another time, but they must press to get that right. Still she had much to offer them.

She asked the group for stories. It didn't take long before the men and women were telling tales in low voices that rose excitedly at dramatic moments. They told horror stories, the scarier the better. Many dated from before the time of the colonizers and featured supernatural beings, some animal-like, others human. When the group ran out of scary stories, they told riddles and proverbs and discussed what they meant. As trust built, the people discussed their problems and potential solutions, describing their living conditions and what they wanted for their children and the importance of education. It was a time of joining together, a sacred time for all to share in the community that was theirs.

Marta was witness to the bonding. She recalls, "Intuitively I knew that a community was being created and there was a different level of perspective and that the community would never be the same again because of that circle."

The view was quite different on the wide verandas of the luxurious plantation houses, where the wealthy coffee growers heard about these meetings taking place throughout the country and grew alarmed. To their minds nothing good could come from peasants meeting regularly and discussing their issues and concerns – and worse, with outsiders: urban students. They acted resolutely to stop it. They contacted their friends in high places, fingering the student teachers; the government followed through decisively.

Suddenly from being a government-sanctioned program, literacy training became a subversive action. The government hunted the student teachers and some were killed. "This was life as we knew it," Marta reflects. "When we were going into the countryside we were not only making friendships, we were breaking the taboo of mixing with other 'classes.' They killed some of us as a precaution, a warning."

The government's actions added one more layer of fear, but it didn't numb Marta to her experiences in the village. She loved the connections she made and felt at home with the people. She observed their power, but also learned how much had been taken from them – and for how long. She saw how they were forced into mere survival. It was the end of the 1950s and by then she and many of the caring youth knew how wrong it was to be deprived of so much, and to have it done most often by force, repression and death – under the guise of keeping law and order, and all under a government, a military regime, that was the result of fraud or a coup d'état.

### **Making it Happen – One Step at a Time**

In autumn 1963, with El Salvador's seventh military president in 30 years in power and only months before U.S. President John F. Kennedy would be shot in Dallas, Marta said the first of what would become a custom of goodbyes to her family. She traveled 2,000 miles to St. Davids, Pennsylvania where she enrolled in premed classes at Eastern Baptist College. A strikingly verdant campus, Eastern Baptist was situated on 92 acres of lakes, wooded walking trails and protected wetlands, but the beauty just made Marta homesick for her country's lakes and mountains.

But certainly it was a good time to leave home. Assaults on members of the student movement and those who had participated in the literacy training were on the rise, and tensions had escalated between coalitions of people demanding justice, peace, the rule of law and the Salvadoran government. To help her leave the country, Marta's friend Mrs. Grace Hatler, an American missionary and the director of her boarding school, had convinced Eva and Teodoro that Marta should attend a Christian college in the United States, rather than in Catholic Spain. Grace learned of Eastern Baptist and, with her guidance, Marta was granted the highest scholarship by the university, on the basis of her achievements; it contributed 50 percent toward her tuition.

Marta's home and education prepared her for a life of service; she had committed to become a doctor. The need was tremendous. At the time there were three doctors and 17 hospital beds for every 10,000 Salvadorans, and 90 percent of doctors never left the cities. As desperate as the situation was in El Salvador, many countries in Africa were in worse need. Marta seriously considered going to serve one of the countries in that continent. But she abandoned that goal once she began studying in the United States, determining that her work would always be among her people and that she would return as soon as possible.

In Pennsylvania, Marta found among all the greenery a white student body. It was the year George Wallace, being sworn in as governor of Alabama, proclaimed "segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation always." Marta was the sole Latina at Eastern. She found many foreign students who wanted to assimilate, become part of the U.S. culture, but she wanted the opposite. And in this context she affirmed her Latinhood.

To pay school fees and support herself, she worked in the campus cafeteria and babysat nights and every weekend, finding a way to squeeze in studying after putting her young charges to sleep. She couldn't afford textbooks, so she studied in the library where the books were on reserve. She continued to practice her lifelong habit of reading newspapers while she waited every night until the library was closing and she could check out the textbooks overnight.

In the dorm, Marta tried to comprehend U.S. dating rituals, which didn't make much sense to her and seemed meaningless. Sororities. Fraternities. Double dating. Pinning. Banquets. Ball Gowns. Dances. They all seemed superficial and rather senseless. She could not understand how young people were not concerned about what was going on in the world and in their country, about the situation of indigenous peoples, of the miners and of hunger in the world. Her concern was not about gowns, shoes or dances. She knew that in her country the schools did not have microscopes, telescopes, benzene burners or test tubes – things she bought and mailed home.

She was sometimes asked to participate in these rituals, but usually declined, coming up with excuses that amused her friends then – and her today. When asked to go on a double date she would say, “No, I can’t go out because I’m going back to El Salvador” – as if she were catching a bus that night. Marta kept away from those outings, knowing she was not interested in developing a relationship in the United States. Her lens was trained on her homeland and she believed she was in the United States only in passing. Besides, she was always saving her money for bus fare. Her newspaper reading informed her about issues and community struggles in different parts of the United States and world which she felt she had to learn about.

She learned of matters that roused her concern – the difficulties faced by striking coal miners in the United States, and the indigenous First Nations in both the United States and Canada. She needed to understand the social issues being played out around her. She believed that the more she learned about struggles like these, the better prepared she would be on her return to El Salvador. Understanding these situations would provide insights about the problems of her people, for they were peasant, indigenous workers suffering injustice and impoverishment too.

Very early one Friday morning, she packed cheese, crackers and jelly, made her way to the Greyhound station and boarded a bus for a town in Pennsylvania where a strike had closed a coal mine. Upon her arrival five hours later, she walked to the mayor’s office, courteously introduced herself and explained the reason for her visit: She wanted to see the mine, meet the strikers and understand their reasons for the strike. She explained she was from El Salvador and there was no coal there. She was interested in what this was about, what did it mean for the strikers? She didn’t have money for a hotel, but could pay for a room in a private home.

The sheriff was called in. Someone produced a map of the world and Marta pointed out El Salvador. The group asked her what she was studying and what her future plans were. In time they contacted the Baptist minister who welcomed her and took her to a mining family that was part of the congregation. On Sunday morning she went to church with the family, where she was asked to introduce herself and give a greeting to the congregation. That afternoon she strapped on a miner’s lamp, stepped into the metal cage that took miners into the darkness daily, and descended. When the cage stopped on the bottom, she was allowed to walk a short distance through a dimly lit tunnel, carved walls of earth on every side.

For Marta this was a striking example of the situation of workers in the United States. These were the hard-working people, just as the peasants of El Salvador. A similar visit to an indigenous peoples’ reservation showed that the conditions of indigenous peoples were the same everywhere: no human, religious or cultural rights, no land, no history of their own – all these the result of conquest and colonialism, just like it was at home or Guatemala, or as the ULAJE students said for the indigenous peoples of Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador. She had begun to learn and deepen her understanding about racism and discrimination.



Marta hit a snag in freshman speech class. The speech teacher heard Marta’s accent, curled her lip and declared it a speech defect. The teacher, a drama professor, sent her to take speech correction class. Marta was outraged and refused to believe this or participate in any activities to “fix” it. The teacher retaliated by sending Marta to the dean. In his office she

defended herself, the way she had been taught by Eva and Teodoro. “I am a Latin woman and I have an accent. I don’t have a speech defect.” And she added, “I don’t mind it and want to learn English, but I’m not a *gringa*.”

On the day of her final speech, Marta stood proudly before her fellow students and regaled them with a description of a fantastical university in her country – but of her imagination, where students studied only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays and spent the remainder of their time in active learning, traveling to villages, states and nations to learn about the world firsthand. When she finished, students surrounded Marta, interested to hear more. Where was this great place? Could they sign up?

Somehow, through her “speech defect,” the students managed to understand every one of Marta’s words. She knew she had given a great speech, but the teacher gave her a bad grade anyway. The experience was one more lesson for her on discriminating practices and racism.



Marta found a home for her heart when she met Puerto Ricans living in Philadelphia. There weren’t many Salvadorans in the Northeast yet in the mid-‘60s, but large numbers of Latinos from the Caribbean had migrated into the area and worked in factories or as farm workers on southern New Jersey agricultural fields, picking asparagus, tomatoes, peaches, strawberries, cucumbers, eggplants, blueberries and cranberries. She felt they had such a social similarity with the working class and peasant people of her country – the language, the culture – but more importantly they had the same experience as the country people who were impoverished and landless, a matter of great concern for her back home.

In Philadelphia she volunteered in the church and as an assistant for a dentist who provided free dental care to impoverished Puerto Ricans. She translated at the clinics, legal services and schools, and at meetings in which the community was seeking relief from police brutality, harassment and corruption. As she learned more, especially about Puerto Rican youth who had nothing to do, no place to go during the long, hot summers at the farm workers’ camps, she founded her first community group, Puerto Rican Youth for Action (PYA), which provided cultural and enrichment programs including tutoring, college preparation, a day care center and a theater, as well as advocacy for farm workers’ rights. It also opened opportunities to the farm workers for political participation with the larger Puerto Rican and Latin community at the local, state, national and international levels.

At the time, large agricultural corporations were moving into south New Jersey, buying up land, planting mega-acre mechanized farms and threatening to displace the established smaller farms. To survive, the small farmers were squeezing migrant workers, giving them less and less, providing substandard housing and paying only the “rural” minimum wage.

Marta met Gumersindo Ramos, one of the thousands of farm workers who came from Puerto Rico to work the harvest from March to September. His story became an important lesson on how the system worked. As a diabetic, he needed regular care which he could receive at the clinic. But when Gumersindo went for checkups, he missed work and therefore didn’t get paid. Not getting paid was a problem, but much worse was that there was no resolution to his health problems.

As a premed student, Marta knew the long-term problems with this illness and she encouraged him to get the care it required. By then, Gumersindo had learned to trust her. He went on to explain that as the migrant workers moved around, from Florida to Pennsylvania as in his case, county health clinics were set up as part of federal and state programs. Jobs were created at the federal, state and county levels to administer the programs and provide services. There were nurse, doctor, aid, office and driver jobs created that benefited the local non-farm worker people of the community where the clinics were set up. Yet, the problem was that the farm workers never really got the help and support needed, for what happened in Florida was never coordinated with New Jersey, so each time the case began anew. The workers were never given their records, so it was a waste of time for the worker – and jobs for the non-farm working people in the county were seasonal (though many of the administrators held their jobs year-round). This was a common experience, and the same was true for the summer school programs for the farm workers' children. They could never advance in school as they moved from one state to another.

Then Marta got a look deeper inside systems of production and into the lives of farm workers – including industrialized agriculture and how these affected the lives of the workers and food systems all over the world. She spent a lot of time on the roads between fields and orchards in her tiny white car. One afternoon she came upon a man who was sitting on the side of the road, his foot wrapped in an ace bandage. Earlier in the day a tractor in the asparagus field had run over it. A Puerto Rican migrant farm worker about 30 years old, Wilfredo had dark, curly hair and, despite his injury, a smile on his face. "I've been waiting for you to go by," he told her. He had left messages for her with people in other farm workers' camps to look for him. In faith, he had waited for Marta. She loaded him into the back seat and drove as fast as she could to the hospital.

While Marta waited for Wilfredo's bloody foot to be treated, she wondered, what now? How was he going to work? With this injury, he wouldn't be able to work for weeks. If he couldn't return to the fields soon, he would have no money to buy food and medicine, and the crew leader would kick him out of the farm workers' compound.

The next day, Marta began investigating at the regional social security office about 40 miles away. She learned Wilfredo had no workers' compensation benefits to help him through his recuperation. How could this be? Wilfredo had receipts from every pay period that showed taxes for this purpose had been regularly deducted as required by law. It soon became apparent that Wilfredo's crew leader had pocketed the money and never paid the taxes to the government. Marta's friend had been defrauded.

Marta took the case to farm worker legal services. Their investigations turned up hundreds of similar cases. Sometimes the crew leader, and sometimes the farmer, had kept the money for social security or workers' compensation – enough for a class action law suit. With Wilfredo participating, the case was won.

Marta's prominence in the case brought her to the attention of the farm owners and she received death threats. She was labeled a communist for the first time in the United States, but not the last time in her life. Here she was, a 20-year-old college student who dreamed of hummingbirds and butterflies from her mother's garden, facing new and formidable enemies.

But she had the backbone to continue. She might have been young and frightened, but she wasn't a quitter. Now she reflects, "It was an issue of character. If anything my parents gave me a sense of character and integrity. And in making a choice, I always had to choose character. It was a matter of justice, thus of peace."



On her daily rounds, Marta turned off a main road and onto a dirt driveway that led to the long narrow building where farm workers lived. As she slowly passed the farm house, the owner of the land emerged, armed with a double barrel shotgun.

"Get out of here," he told Marta as he pressed the shotgun to her head. "You're trespassing. I can kill you if I want!"

Marta did not put up a fight. She knew the law was on the farmer's side. At the time, farm workers had no right to visitors. A land owner could do what he liked on his property, and many liked denying the workers visitors. This meant educational or health services that were geared toward migrant workers could rarely be delivered where they lived.

After she was assaulted with the shotgun, Marta discussed the issue with the New Jersey Council of Churches and Farm Workers Legal Services. Together the groups worked hard to convince a New Jersey Legislative Task Force that the situation needed to be changed. But before they acted, the legislators wanted to see things firsthand. That was easily arranged.

On the afternoon of the visit, Marta, representatives of the other groups and the chair of the task force drove onto a farmer's property. It took only a few moments for the situation to grow volatile. The crew leader and a handful of farm workers struck the car with baseball bats, breaking the glass – and the legislator's arm as he sat in the passenger seat.

"This is the best proof I need," the legislator commented wryly.

Sure to his word, he soon drafted a bill that for the first time allowed farm workers to have whomever they wanted visit them, whenever they wanted. The bill became New Jersey law.

Yet as hard as it was to get the law passed due to the farmer and agribusiness lobby, the law could just as easily be repealed. Just a few years later, it was. For Marta, it was a real lesson on democracy at work, and how ignorance is an enemy to justice and peace.



A farm worker's body was found hanging from a bush only a few feet high, his feet still in the dirt. Quoting the crew leader, the newspapers reported the death as a suicide. Marta couldn't believe it. "How can you hang yourself from such a little bush? It was obviously a crime."

Marta had watched for months as Philadelphia newspapers and television stations had portrayed farm workers as drunken criminals, rapists and thieves. The suicide case convinced her it was time to visit media newsrooms in the city.

In these meetings, she described the living conditions the farm workers endured. She pointed out the role of mafia-like groups that brought prostitution, gambling and alcohol into the camps. She challenged the reporters and editors to dig deeper and make a thorough investigation of the relationships and abuses. But they replied that they did not have the contacts, nor did they know the area. As a first step, she proposed that the editors and reporters tour the farm workers' camps to witness the conditions. Some took her up on it, and she served as translator on these trips. Slowly if unevenly, Marta saw media coverage improve.

One resulting relationship enabled Marta to tell her own truth to a wider audience. The news director at the ABC affiliate offered her a weekly television show, in part to fulfill governmental requirements for public access programming. Marta thought he might not believe she would take his offer. For two years, Marta wrote and hosted a television show in Spanish with English subtitles that brought in speakers to talk about social issues from a Latin perspective. The show gave her the opportunity to build on her experience with the farm workers, broaden her knowledge and that of the Spanish-speaking community in the tri-state area, and deepen her commitment. She remembers, "At that time I was making it happen – one step at a time."

The work with the farm workers taught her much about the workings of the system and also introduced her to those social movements and organizations working for justice and civil and human rights. Marta was invited and joined many of these processes as a member of committees and task forces, such as the legislature teaming with the New Jersey Council of Churches; the migrant ministries of the U.S. National Council of Churches; the U.N. Commissions on Migrants and Migration, and on Decolonization; the Quakers and other peace organizations and their various committees; the U.N.'s International Labor Organization; and global educational and environmental civil society organizations.



In her junior year at Eastern Baptist College, Marta focused attention on her future as a doctor for Salvadorans. She volunteered as a candy striper and pink lady in three hospitals – one for the middle-class, a specialty hospital and one for impoverished people, all near Philadelphia. She wanted to get an inside look at what lay ahead for her in that profession and vocation.

Nothing about it was right. Doctors and nurses were overweight and smoked – what did that have to do with health? Nurses argued over who was going to empty bed pans and clean up the patients. Carts overflowed with pills and were wheeled from bedside to bedside. Each pill came with a price tag that prevented it from ever making it to a bedside in El Salvador.

Salvadoran peasants earned \$1.50 for a 12-hour work day at the time (women earned 50 percent less). Most families could not afford to feed their children. More than half of all children died before the age of 5, and 80 percent were malnourished. Malnutrition was a leading cause of death, as was enteritis and other diarrheal diseases, results of drinking unsafe water. Women had an average of six to eight living children, but often twice as many pregnancies. In the entire country there was only one maternity hospital.

Marta couldn't make the two realities into one. She did not appreciate the inhumanity she saw in U.S. hospitals. And where in these sterile hallways was the relevance to her world, her



home? If she spent a decade becoming a doctor, how would this training transfer? What difference could she make in El Salvador with its overwhelming health problems? Suddenly the picture Marta associated with the word “doctor” looked a lot different than it had when the missionaries glorified it.

As she thought it through, she realized she would never give up on the Salvadoran people, but she needed a different understanding to move forward. She didn’t want to help sick people get better. She wanted to work for the health and wholeness of people and the planet. Eventually, she gave up her plans to become a doctor and chose the path of sustainability and peace for her future: “I want to work for my people so they don’t get sick. I want them to learn the rules of life and how to take care of themselves. I want to work on health, wellness and the enjoyment of life for people and communities, and for a healthy and natural social environment.”



Finally, she came home.

Four years had turned a bad situation worse: Increasing political resistance had been met with accelerating violence. By the late ‘60s, Catholic priests and lay people had established Christian Base Communities to work toward a new concept of social justice. Trade unionists, teachers, clergy and professionals had created mass organizations with 60,000 or more members. Their organizing, including strikes, demonstrations and mass rallies, were countered by the government with teargas and machine guns.

Marta returned to her parents’ home in San Salvador in 1967 after earning a bachelor’s degree in Biology. Her goal was to remain in El Salvador and apply for the position of director of the boarding school she had attended. But her happy homecoming was short lived.

Within days, she received a telegram from a small group of economically and politically powerful men. The telegram contained a polite invitation to lunch, but the family took from it an ominous, sinister meaning. Marta’s father, upset, urged her not to go. But she could see the reality. If they could track her down to send a telegram, they certainly knew where to find her.

A friend of her parents drove her to the restaurant, located in an exclusive area not visited by people from her neighborhood. Five men in business suits offered the 22-year-old Marta a seat at a round table. Lunch was served on the white tablecloth.

The men noted that Marta had just returned to El Salvador. They commented that they had heard she had been organizing farm workers and working for César Chávez, the founder of the United Farmworkers Union in the United States. The latter part was not true.

One of the men leaned in toward her and asked, “Do you know that it is against the law for peasants to be organized in this country?”

With her lunch untouched in front of her, Marta replied, “No, I don’t know anything about that.”

Another man continued the threatening line of questioning. “Do you know that people get killed here if they get involved in things they shouldn’t be involved in?”

Marta sat still and tried to look calm. “I’m just here for a visit. I have to continue my education. I’m very involved in my studies.”

Safely back at home, Marta announced her decision to return to the United States. A few weeks later, she was back in Pennsylvania – without regret. A wider perspective took root inside her: It’s not where you are, she thought, but the work you are doing that matters. She made the commitment that wherever she was, she would work for justice and peace for her country and the peoples of the world. She would live her life for that.

### **Finding Vocations**

Also during this time at home, Marta visited the directors of her high school. Mrs. Hatler, the director of the boarding school, requested that she consider staying home and taking over her position as her assignment was coming to an end. She felt it was time for a person from El Salvador to take over that responsibility. Mrs. Hatler had also seen the importance of having a Salvadoran leading as director of the Colegio Bautista, since the head missionary’s time there was also coming to an end.

Marta then met with that head missionary, who told her she could not become director, citing her lack of theological training. But Mrs. Hatler, crying, told Marta that in truth he was not in favor of a Salvadoran as a director of the school, nor of keeping the boarding school open. He didn’t see the boarding school as a profitable business. If it closed, he could build and expand the day school. As far as Marta was concerned, the missionary’s practices were sexist, given the way he treated the female missionaries, especially Mrs. Hatler, and women in general. Mrs. Hatler was a widow, and the head missionary counted it against her that serving the Lord in the mission field had not been her first choice – even though he was married and had children himself. Given these conditions, Marta thought that if theological training was needed, she would pursue it.

In Philadelphia she settled uneasily into the program at Eastern Baptist Seminary. But even as she embarked on religious studies, Marta didn’t consider herself religious. Her foundation was spiritual, in keeping with her mother’s teaching that the world is a garden and humans are placed in paradise on Earth to experience peace, happiness and to care for each other and Mother Earth. Her beliefs and concerns for the impoverishment and suffering experienced by the majority of the world, and the reasons behind such unjust situations, made her unique among her fellow seminary students.

At an introductory gathering, all the divinity students took turns describing the single moment they felt the call to the ministry. When it was her chance, Marta shook her head and explained that for her there wasn’t a big event, a single moment; she had been this way since she was a little girl, listening to her mother, developing understanding and awareness for living in the Garden. The class pressed for an answer, but she shared that she knew we were all on Mother Earth to live in peace, justice, without hunger or poverty. This was the call of God to her.

The other students dismissed her as vague and inauthentic. As she came to know them better, she was dismayed to see how much these future pastors were positioning themselves to lead a big church and earn a handsome salary. She wanted neither. All she wanted was for her people and her country to live in peace, with dignity, without fear and wants. And sometimes, laughingly, she would beseech God, “Please, please, please, don’t let me marry a minister and stay in the United States!”

But the pleading was really only to amuse herself. She didn’t intend to marry, although in the years to come she would have meaningful relationships with Salvadoran men with whom she shared politics and the passions of living a committed, meaningful life for all humans and the care of the planet. She saw no husband in her future, no children; both situations would not allow her to work so intentionally on her vocation and call to work for peace and justice in the world. From an early age, Marta could see that change was needed and that the people must work for that. By the time she was 17, she decided she would not have any children, that she would live to work for the rights of all the children in her country and the world. Having her own would not allow her to bring about this vision and commitment. She would respond that way to young men who were seeking her for marriage. Though they would be agreeable at the beginning, soon they would show that they really wanted a traditional relationship in a patriarchal society, which meant to follow the man. This was not her call; she would continue her path, regardless of how much she cared for the man.

“Sometimes I feel that I was born married,” she reflects, “and I am married to a husband who is called El Salvador who does not let me go to bed or get up without thinking things through.” Even though her meaningful relationships were all with men committed to social transformation, she chose always to live her call. But it was these experiences which allowed her to touch love, to know real love and commitment, at a depth that even now guides her life.



Her fellow pastors and theologians in training had to practice their preaching skills at daily chapel, where attendance was required. Marta sat through it for a while, but found it insufferable and quit going, earning herself a trip to the dean’s office.

She liked his open and friendly manner. He was Scottish with a twinkling smile, and Marta could tell right away that he saw humor in the situation, especially after she told him, “Well, those men are telling a lot of wrong things and I cannot stand it.”

The dean asked Marta what she did instead of attending chapel. She shared that she went to her room at the end of the hall with the two big windows and sat in quiet reflection. She thought about El Salvador and all she would do when she returned. She spent the time considering what was happening to impoverished Salvadorans, the reasons for their condition and what they needed. “I need to take time with my people,” she told him.

The dean heard this and nodded gravely. He worked with the seminary to allow Marta an exemption from chapel. He agreed that she needed time with her people and motherland.



For Easter vacation one year, Marta was invited to the Dominican Republic to serve as a translator for a group of doctors of the Christian Medical Society who were volunteering their time to treat impoverished peasants. From the capital Santo Domingo she was transported to a village nestled in beautiful green hillsides.

The next morning a makeshift clinic was set up and a long line of people formed. The first patient complained of a pain in his chest that would not go away. Marta translated. The second one had a similar complaint, as did the third and many, many others, perhaps as many as half of those in line – most of them women. The doctors were concerned about the number of people with the same illness, one that they did not know about. They asked Marta to get them to explain more.

As they tried to describe the illness, Marta looked in their eyes and saw the stress of life, the anguish of impoverishment that certainly contributed to their pain. The doctor's boxes did not contain medicine for heartache or the anxiety that comes with hunger, social insecurity and so many needs.

The patients were given a little bag of vitamins and sent home. She made sure the doctors understood the pain and anxiety that comes from living in such poverty, with no hope and under the insecurity and repression of a military dictatorship. But the doctors could not really understand, especially not the relationship of their own government and standard of life with the realities and lives of these impoverished patients.

At weeks' end the clinic was dismantled and the doctors left the Dominican Republic for a holiday with their wives in nearby Jamaica.

*How did this help?* Marta wondered. Charity without intention and clarity had left the peasants no better off than before, while the doctors felt good for helping, the organization got recognition, and the government appreciated their work.

When she returned to Pennsylvania, she did the math and wrote the doctors a letter. She calculated each doctor had spent \$5,000 on "lost wages," and to this they could add the cost of the Jamaican holiday. Multiply that by the 30 participating physicians and you come to an impressive sum that, used wisely, might make a difference.

If you mean business, Marta wrote to the doctors, stay home and donate the \$150,000 to the Dominican Republic's state university medical school so it can train local doctors to take care of illnesses and develop social programs for the heart pains of the Dominican people. The medical students of the national university had been systematically repressed, imprisoned, disappeared and exiled for marching and demanding real health care for the people. This was just as in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Argentina and Chile – all the places where there were military governments or dictatorships.

The doctors did not respond to her recommendation. While the medical missions to the Dominican Republic continued, the root causes of the lack of health deepened – as did the suffering. And this while a dictatorship continued to govern the country.



By 1975 Marta had completed seminary studies and was halfway through another master's degree in Student Personnel Services at a New Jersey state university that she hoped would help her provide guidance counseling for Salvadoran students when she returned home. She taught night classes at the university on Latin American history and culture and on emerging global issues. She mentored farm workers and persuaded them to attend university, promoted their rights and served on various committees of the National Council of Churches and on boards of Latin American processes for human and social rights. She had been employed by family counseling services and the Salem County Migrant Ministries program, offering services in Spanish to migrants. She also worked for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to bring together nonprofit groups working on social issues and concerns among Spanish-speaking people in the United States and Central and South America. She led the Third World Coalition of the AFSC to work for affirmative action and restorative justice within the committee's national and international programs. The situation of state violence against the people in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala was increasing, so she helped to create the local, national and international solidarity committees and programs to stop the violence.

And she was exhausted. She was worn out by the struggle to support herself and torn by the various directions of her life that increasingly prevented her from focusing on the escalating violence at home. She was haunted knowing thousands of El Salvadorans had been murdered struggling for basic human rights. Her sleep was troubled.

When she made an inventory of her life, she identified one aspect that could go: money. She quit her various jobs and drew the last paychecks of her life in September 1975. She hasn't taken a salary since. She would never regret the decision. "I never had a lot, but I had enough. It would happen that at a particular time I wouldn't have a lunch, but something would happen and I would have a great dinner. And most importantly, I was being my commitment."

She learned to get by with very little. She shared a two-bedroom apartment (rent: \$100) with farm workers who now were attending college. She bought fruits and vegetables at Cow Town, a sprawling farmers' market. And she adjusted her schedule so she would never waste time nor gas driving her stick shift Datsun (miles per gallon: 49) during rush hour.

We have God within. We have the air, water, the soil, Mother Earth, the environment. We have a good brain to think with. We have everything we need to carry out our vocations. Why do we put our faith in money? I have had to use a lot of imagination and creativity, but I have done a lot of big things this way.



As chair of the Third World Coalition of the AFSC, Marta helped plan the first international meeting in Mexico City that brought together groups from various ethnic backgrounds from the United States and Central and South America. In this way they could educate one another about their concerns and issues, struggles, the historical roots of their situations, and how they could work for qualitative change and come to understand internationalism and its practice. Before leaving for the meeting, Marta gave away her few possessions, turned her apartment over to her roommates and said goodbye to her friends. She drove to Mexico City and after the meeting continued on to El Salvador, hoping this time she could stay for good.

On her first evening home, Marta and her parents met a family friend, Señora Menche. She was about 55 years old and made and sold paper flowers to earn a modest living. In casual conversation, Marta mentioned the coalition meeting. Later that evening when the family was back home, Señora Menche knocked on the door. She had questions for Marta: What was a coalition, and what is the purpose of a coalition? What was the meeting about? Marta explained everything, and inside her grew anew the respect for her people. She felt such amazement and joy that this humble woman who was so interested in the work for peace being pursued so far away, that even at night, when she could do it, she took a dangerous risk and went to learn about something seemingly so foreign, yet so relevant to her.

That same night, the death squads tortured and murdered the first elected Salvadoran legislator who represented a trade union. A few days before, a young trade union leader, the husband of one of Marta's friends and a student at the national university of El Salvador, was abducted one night as he came out of a trade union meeting. His murderers cut him up, set him on fire and scattered the burned pieces. The wife received a message advising her that there was no use to look for his body.

In the following days, Marta met with former colleagues and friends who were working for human rights within the movement in El Salvador. If she stayed, they told her, she would certainly be killed. Newcomers were easy to target, and by remaining in the country Marta would put others in jeopardy, too. They told her that everyone was being hunted, but also that her work and her connections in the social transformation network were very much needed in the United States, for justice and peace in El Salvador and the world.

So once more she returned to school in Pennsylvania. It was not an easy choice, but the commitment was clear about the work to do: to work to stop all forms of repression in El Salvador, the region and the world.



She started doctoral ministry studies at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, but again her focus was on what she could do from the United States to create awareness of the increasing violence and disintegration of human rights back home. By this time groups of Salvadorans in San Francisco, Washington, New York and Los Angeles had created a network dedicated to educating themselves and others about the situation in their home country and to monitor and develop strategies to end the violence and prevent a war. The groups began a letter-writing campaign and orchestrated stand-ins in front of the consulates in New York and San Francisco. They encouraged media coverage. Their message was clear: If El Salvador moved just one more step in its current direction, the result would be a bloody civil war.

These groups prepared for an influx of refugees from El Salvador. Marta again helped plan a Third World Coalition meeting, this time in Chicago, to create an educational program for communities that would likely be impacted by new waves of refugees. The hope was that if communities understood what these refugees had been through, they would open their hearts and welcome their presence and be part of the movement for peace, to end the repression and to prevent the war.

Marta also began the process of bringing El Salvador's controversial Archbishop Óscar Romero, to the United States. A year earlier when he had been elected to the position, Monsignor Romero had been considered a conservative and disappointing choice, but over the months he had emerged as an increasingly outspoken opponent of the government's unjust and repressive practices, challenging it to confront the oppression and restore peace to the country, and voicing the call for the respect of human rights.

With Jovelino Ramos, executive secretary of the Commission on Justice, Liberation and Human Fulfillment – also known as the Fifth Commission – and Jorge Lara-Braud, director of the Office of Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches in the United States, Marta (a member of the Fifth Commission) began drafting a letter to the Council of Churches recommending that Monsignor Romero be invited to address the council's annual general assembly, in the summer of 1979. Even though a Catholic priest had never addressed this organization before, the recommendation was approved.

Marta had been in touch with Monsignor Romero, beginning a correspondence that would span more than a year, encouraging him in his work and informing him about the groundswell of support for Salvadorans' rights in the United States, Europe and other parts of the world. As the day of his arrival in New York grew near, Monsignor Romero became caught up in delicate negotiations with the government, defending the rights of the directorate of the key trade union (who could suffer a bloody repression) and unleashing more actions from the peoples' movement. He had to cancel his appearance.

But in coordination with his visit, Marta had organized a large Mass to be officiated by Monsignor Romero at the well-known St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, and to be preceded by a procession through the streets of Manhattan. Both events were held despite his absence, and a collection was taken for his work.

The National Council of Churches decided to go to him instead and selected a delegation which included Marta. They left that fall for El Salvador on a trip that would change her life. After celebrating an ecumenical Mass in the unfinished national cathedral, Monsignor Romero gazed directly into Marta's eyes and asked, "When will you be coming to help me?"

"When you need me," she responded.

"We need you now."

"Right away," she replied without hesitation. As she had done before, she returned to the United States, gave away her belongings and closed up her apartment.

**“I choose to live, not die, for the revolution”**

Marta arrived back home in San Salvador with a single backpack and a pair of Earth shoes, in case she was forced to walk the 40 miles into the city from the brand new glass-and-white El Salvador International Airport. That’s how bad things were in the fall of 1979. Transportation strikes regularly shut down the capital. She couldn’t count on anything except her feet.

San Salvador appeared to her a place of terror. Smoked windows in armored Cherokee vans. Military trucks and tanks patrolling the streets and roads – each with soldiers holding rifles and submachine guns aimed at people from the open windows. Roadblocks everywhere and behind them soldiers with their fingers on the trigger. Killings, arrests and disappearances were commonplace. The campaign slogan of the military was sprawled on the walls of buildings: “Be a patriot. Kill a Jesuit priest, a trade unionist, a teacher.” Inside every telephone booth was a number to call – anonymity promised – to report any suspicious action, any suspect person. A single call and an innocent could be hunted. No one was safe.

Newspapers reported the brutality like box scores: A mother and her two sons hacked to death in their beds by eight *desconocidos* – unknowns. The unidentified body of a young man, strangled, found on the shoulder of a road. The unidentified bodies of three young men, discovered on another road, their faces partially destroyed by bayonets.

By this time, the escalating violence had become the theme of all Archbishop Romero’s Sunday homilies, listened to by tens of thousands of Salvadorans from crowded pews, loudspeakers and portable radios throughout the country. In September 1979, a month before Marta would arrive back home, Monsignor Romero gave his congregation sobering numbers to ponder: 580 people killed in the first nine months of the year, four times more than the previous year.

If he had once been considered too conservative, too unwilling to confront the government, his reputation was now the opposite. Monsignor Romero refused to bless the new government, an obligation previously performed by all archbishops. He preached fervently about the need for social justice. He spoke beseechingly of Salvadoran children who from the earliest age had to earn their own livings, young people who had no chance to get ahead, peasants who lacked even basic necessities, laborers whose rights were bargained away, the underemployed, throngs of outcasts and the aged who felt useless.

In a country where the only hope of survival for so many was silence, Monsignor Romero publicly described, detailed and denounced. He sounded the alarm, provided the moral compass. “It is clear the reason for our anguish,” he intoned one Sunday that year. “The masses of the poor and all those who take their part are systematically exterminated. In our country God’s children are being murdered with impunity, especially the poor, God’s favored.” And he cited the words of a 9-year-old boy, asking for the release of his mother who had disappeared: “Please, her freedom!”

“In this suffering land,” he commented wryly, “even freedom must be begged.”





Marta met with Monsignor Romero immediately upon her arrival. She had become an ordained minister, on his request – a symbolic and concrete way of working ecumenically and in unity, and highlighting the importance of women's ordination. He asked her to join his new Ecumenical Committee for Humanitarian Aid (CEAH), a group of nuns, priests, evangelicals, pastors, doctors, nurses and lay people, whom he had charged with providing support for the increasing number of peasants who were suffering all kinds of repression and violence. He also wanted the group to think about permanent solutions – how to create conditions that would end the war. For Marta, this meant a call to bring justice in order to have peace.

Monsignor Romero asked Marta to direct the work of the committee to resolve the issues in concrete, practical ways. He personally drove her to her office, tearing around turns as she clung to the door handle. The building was 15 minutes away from the archdiocese headquarters – three blocks from the U.S. embassy, which put it in a high danger zone. Monsignor Romero took the time to show her around the tiny reception area and work space, and introduce her to the secretary.

Then her work with the ecumenical committee began. Only a few weeks later, more than 100 refugees from bombings and violence outside San Salvador would arrive and encamp on a soccer field on the grounds of the archdiocese headquarters. More groups were arriving daily, hungry and weary, widows and their babies, the wounded and the nearly dead. Commonly, they came with nothing.

The CEAH was considered illegal by the government and its work was forbidden. In the country, anyone who gave so much as a glass of water to a stranger could be arrested for aiding the rebels. An innocent person found with a bottle of rubbing alcohol was in danger of police questioning, threats and beatings. Marta and her committee needed tens of thousands of gallons of drinking water, hundreds of bottles of rubbing alcohol and bandages, and daily nutrition for what would become thousands of refugees. They used every possible method to secure these and lived daily with the threat of discovery and the repression that resulted from it.

The refugee centers were established in churches, schools and public buildings. They were constant targets for drive-by and fly-by attacks of machine gun sprays from cars and helicopters. Refugees and people in the countryside were taught how to remove bullets and sew sutures, since it was now entirely too dangerous to go to a hospital. Gunshot victims who arrived at hospitals were immediately taken to jail.

Marta and her committee also trained the refugees to play leadership roles in their new lives. Each camp was responsible for maintaining its security, monitoring health issues, and providing education for the children and some form of recreation. Inspiring hope was also important. Marta drew on her spiritual beliefs to convince refugees their lives held a future beyond a sleeping mat spread on the floor of a school's dimly-lit back room.

For money to operate the camps, Marta sought out her contacts in the United States, especially Protestant organizations such as the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches in the United States and their partners and related movements, which were all prompt to respond and became faithful and generous benefactors of these efforts. As part of the coordination, Marta met regularly with the Monsignor to inform him about the number of

arriving refugees, where they were coming from, what help was coming in and all other aspects of the work.

Always he was quiet – reserved but approachable. She admired how he often took time to retreat for reflection, and his humble way of life. He lived in a tiny room with a single bed, table, chair and radio, in a small Catholic charity hospital for terminally ill patients, run by nuns. He refused to continue work on the unfinished cathedral so long as any Salvadoran was suffering. Like so many others, Marta had great respect and trust for his ministry in favor of peace and the care of the people of El Salvador.

Marta was in her office one morning when Monsignor called and asked her to come quickly. A new and large group of refugees from the central part of the country was standing at his door and needed help. When she arrived, Marta gazed into the drawn faces of children and many old women using sticks for canes. How could they have survived the three-day walk on the country's dangerous back roads? Marta couldn't fathom it. She searched her mind for a way to help them. The existing refugee centers were overflowing. Furthermore, this group represented a distinct political organization, which meant delicacy would be required to place them. She took a deep breath and calmly asked them to please give her some time to figure out how best to care for their needs.

Marta left the group and a short while later went home for lunch and time to think. As she heated her soup, she flicked on the television news. Her eyebrows went up as her mouth dropped. There on the screen was the group – the same señoras with the sticks and children with the weary faces. They were no longer at Monsignor Romero's office; they were stepping down from public buses which had diverted and taken them to the Costa Rican embassy, waving signs demanding political asylum. "*Dios mio*," Marta exclaimed, her hands to her face. "My God. Imagine this."

Her admiration rose as she recognized the nobility of their action. The true Salvadoran spirit of struggle and transformation had taken the issue to the next level, she thought, as she swelled with pride and respect for them. They saw themselves as part of a bigger picture. They made a plan. They made others stand up and take notice.

The bold move required the Costa Rican government to take action. Negotiations between various governments continued for several days until Costa Rica, however reluctantly, agreed to grant asylum. Marta watched on the news as a procession of diplomatic cars emblazoned with the Costa Rican and Italian flags, and two busloads of refugees, departed for the airport to travel to the one Central American country that has never had an army. Still today in Costa Rica are members of this group who contributed to development and peace.



When she first returned to San Salvador, Marta had moved in with her parents in the old neighborhood where she felt protected, in part by the historic divide between Protestants and Catholics. Since she was 7 years old, Marta had been the good Protestant girl. In their wildest imaginings, no one could possibly dream she might be working with a Catholic archbishop.

Marta was buoyed by the energy and creativity around her. The popular movement challenging the government had emerged like a giant wave growing larger and larger as it rolled in, gathering together people in all the democratic and revolutionary mass organizations. It was no longer possible to stand innocently on the sidelines. Everyone had to take a stand. Marta saw the government as a schoolyard bully that no teacher or principal had the muscle to stop. If there was no one to protect the people from the bully, if no effective ways were developed to transform those situations, Marta believed the only option left was to fight back. She came to understand that when all peaceful means have been exhausted, violence becomes justified and even warranted.

The bully meanwhile insisted there were no problems and prevented the media from investigating and reporting its actions. Both sides escalated the conflict. On the way to work, Marta turned a corner and became witness to a shoot-out. When armored tanks rolled by, the idea that someone was inside watching her made her feel naked and her knees ache. Another time going home, a group of masked students boarded the bus she was on, demanding everyone to vacate. They set the bus on fire and wrote on the outside of it, like a town crier, “Fifteen university students were disappeared yesterday.” They hung the list of names for all to see. Marta thought all the way home about the things people were forced to do in order to defend life.

From the beginning she lived a semi-clandestine life. She went to work before 8 a.m. and returned home by the 6 p.m. curfew, and she attended Mass on Sunday. Period. She did not frequent the political mass demonstrations, restaurants or other public places.

By early 1980, the situation had severely deteriorated. The government was now forcing its captives to go on television and denounce others. The leader of the death squads appeared like a local TV host, publicly fingering more people. A distant association – seven degrees of separation – was enough to be hunted.

Marta begged her parents to move to another part of the country and leave her alone in the house. She worried that if the death squads came for her, they would use the safety of her parents as leverage to force her to identify those she knew in the movement. Her parents argued with Marta, beseeching her to quit this work that was endangering them all. She prevailed by reminding them they had always taught her to follow her heart and convictions. This would serve to halt the arguments – until the next time.

Her parents eventually moved from their home and migrated to various places for their safety. Marta, living alone, installed an iron door and double locks. Every evening before she went to bed, she put her keys on top of the toilet. If murderers pounded on her door in the dreaded deep night, she planned to flush the keys. She would not open the door to them. The plan was somewhat futile she knew; if they wanted her dead, they would simply have to bomb the house. But that would take time to organize, she rationalized. In those moments she would speak gently to herself, calming the panic for a final moment of prayer.



On the evening of March 24, 1980, Monsignor Romero celebrated a memorial Mass at the tiny chapel of the Divine Providence hospital, where he lived, for the mother and father of a journalist. As he spoke the last words of the Eucharist – *This is the body which will be given up for you*

... *this is the cup of blood shed for you* – he was struck down by a gunshot from the rear of the church. As a bullet pierced his chest, he slumped forward, his blood spilling on the altar.

Later that evening, when Marta learned of Monsignor's death, she sobbed – as did all those who loved and respected him. But she immediately foresaw another tragedy about to unfold. After the autopsy, Monsignor's body was to be taken to the basilica, where she had established a refugee center for a large group of the displaced. No place was safe that night as everyone expected further violence. The refugees were clearly in a place of great danger.

The entire city was militarized, with roadblocks everywhere, bullhorns denouncing the social movement organizations and their leaders as communists, and helicopters circling madly overhead. Even on a normal night, Marta would never take a taxicab, as their drivers were often paid by the military to take their passengers directly to the garrisons. But at 1 a.m. Marta, breathing deeply and trying to calm herself, flagged down a cab and asked to be taken to the basilica.

By grace, she arrived safely and found inside several members of the Student Christian Movement of the World Council of Churches, a few nuns and a doctor who was a member of her committee. Together they pushed the pews against the doors as a barricade. The nuns began teaching songs to the small children to keep them calm. And Marta and the others began moving more than 100 refugees, most of them women, children and the elderly, through a wall and onto a roof for safety. As they worked, bombs exploded in the nearby streets.

Marta realized this might be the last night of her life. There was no way out, no decision to be made. She reflected on the choices she had made thus far, especially the one that had brought her here to protect the poor and vulnerable. She affirmed that if she died that night it was in the name of the people who deserved the right to choose their own destinies.

She found a quiet corner, concentrated, and from her soul spoke with Monsignor. She was never happy with martyrdom, and all the suffering related to it. She said she didn't believe in martyrdom – because the Salvadoran people had sacrificed enough. But she understood what Monsignor's life had meant to the struggle for change. She acknowledged the need to create other conditions so everyone could live without having to sacrifice by assassination or other kinds of violence, so no one would be hungry or malnourished, jobless, without education, health and housing – all the things Salvadorans were experiencing.

She called to him, saying softly, "Even if I die tonight, I choose to live, not die, for the revolution." An image appeared to her and she described it to him. "My wish is that I reach my old age and live to tell stories of life, of joyful living and durable, sustainable peace to the youth and children, a history of the power of peace and dignity. I want to plant my mother's gardens wherever I am. These are the symbols of plentitude and peace."

She surprised herself with those words. The movement had challenged everyone to be willing and ready to die for the revolution, but she saw in that moment the victory in choosing to live. She would work to find a humane way to live. She wanted to figure out ways of being so life could be enjoyed. She felt affirmed and clear in this path. Even if death came that night, she had become a different person, one who understood why and how to live. She was ready if soldiers broke down the basilica's doors and they had to face terror and death. It didn't matter to her at

all if she died that night. She felt lighter. Her breath moved easily through her. With renewed power, she continued to work to save as many refugees as possible. *Many must be witnesses for this story to be told*, she thought.

Around 5 a.m., a silence fell on the city as the sun crept over the horizon. Marta opened the doors to look for help, and took with her into this new day a new way of being and living.

### **Little Pieces Left Behind**

After Monsignor Romero's assassination, Marta's life became more dangerous. She coped by trying not to think too deeply about her safety – though being especially careful – and amassing her strength each morning so she could go about the work the archbishop had left her.

But six months after the murder, the day she feared arrived. It was shortly after lunch and Marta was in the bathroom at her office washing up the dishes. A young member of the Student Christian Movement (of which Marta was the chaplain) burst through the office door, and when she didn't see Marta began to cry uncontrollably. She had come hastily from Marta's neighborhood, where the military had cordoned Marta's home and the whole area, looking to imprison her. When she didn't see Marta sitting at her desk, her friend believed the worst – that the military had found her and dragged her away.

Marta and her friend embraced and reassured themselves that by grace they both were alive and still ready to do the work. But now the question was how to move on that day. Marta had been identified and her community was being watched. She could not return home.

After that day, it would be years before Marta returned home; she never set foot in the office again. That night, at the house of one of the cultural workers who led a theater group Marta had been supporting, a plan for her safety was agreed on. Her hair had to be dyed, she had to wear different apparel, new routes and meeting places had to change often, as did the place to stay and sleep. Contact lenses were needed, but they were difficult for her to wear. She never felt at rest.

Still she kept the work of the committee, setting up refugee camps and strategies for ending the war. In these troubled months, she was constantly on the move, without belongings or home. It was difficult to get messages to her co-workers or to find safe places to meet to carry out the work. The safety of others, those who collaborated with her in any way, was always in the back of her mind and a major concern.

Around her in the streets of San Salvador, the war was advancing. Treasury police, national guardsmen and army officers were in the midst of an efficient and ruthless campaign of terror directed at non-militarized segments of the population – political organizers, labor leaders, activists and human rights workers like Marta. By the end of 1980, monthly estimates of the dead climbed as high as 800.

Though the struggle was also happening in the cities, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the umbrella group of guerilla forces, focused on a full-scale rural

insurgency in the northern mountains. As the clashes heightened and army soldiers burned and bombarded whole communities and acres and acres of crops with napalm, tens of thousands of peasants fled across the border to Honduras or into refugee camps Marta set up throughout the capital city.

As the devastation continued, Marta strengthened her belief that peace would only come when the international community became actively involved. It was not enough, she believed, to help refugees settle into temporary camps. It was not enough simply to live through the violence. The only hope, she believed, was to involve influential people in the United States and elsewhere so they would lend their voices to the peace effort and stop the armed conflict.

Through her committee work on refugee camps, Marta met U.S. Maryknoll nuns Maura Clarke and Ita Ford and the lay church women Jean Donovan and Dorothy Kazel. The four were working in communities throughout the country helping Salvadorans survive the bloodshed.

Marta pressed the four women to use their credibility and influence to educate U.S. citizens so they could press actors in key U.S. government positions to bring about changes in policies and stop the military support to the government of El Salvador.

“Who is going to witness to the people and government of the United States?” Marta asked them. “Who has the credibility and the language? You see the people needing immediate help, the charity work. But we need to stop the war, not have an increasing number of people needing help because of the war.”

These were difficult conversations, she remembers, as the church women countered that their calling was clear: Their mission was to respond directly to the needs of the Salvadoran people.

Ita Ford reached out to Marta, providing her with translated news reports and editorials on the civil war from the *New York Times* and other sources. This information was important to see the way people, and political actors, were looking at the conflict, so the people’s movement in El Salvador would know how to reach out to the international community. Ita was sympathetic to Marta’s view that it was important to extend a hand to the people affected by the violence as they cried for help, but also to dig deep to the root and historic bases of the problem.

On Dec. 2, 1980, the four churchwomen, returning from a meeting of their order in Nicaragua, were raped, savagely murdered and buried in a shallow grave near the airport in San Salvador. Marta recalls that just a few days before, the leadership of the large peoples’ coalition for democracy and peace had been kidnapped as they met at a Jesuit high school. Their tortured bodies were found later that day. This was one more scandalous act that terrorized the people.

Now this horrible act of cruelty against the nuns. It was angrily denounced by the U.S. ambassador, who then turned his back on the Salvadoran military – for this showed him how far it could go. The murder of the religious women was felt deeply by the people. It was denounced strongly, and at the memorial services for them, commitments to hold fast to their grace and care were exalted.<sup>10</sup>



By 1982, the level of violence had escalated so dramatically that Marta knew she had to leave the country. After brief stays in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, she settled for the duration of the war in exile in Mexico City.

Her years in boarding school had trained her to cope with separation, and living underground had taught her how to survive with next to nothing. She remembers her time in Mexico with great warmth. In her small rented room, she planted a flower in a discarded plastic bottle and used a tomato crate as her bedside table, perfect for holding her reading material.

“Exiles are like leaving little pieces of you behind every time,” Marta recalls.

You get there and everything is new and you have to remake everything. You leave your things. You hope one day you can get them back. You can only take the minimum. You have to say goodbye, and some of us have to do it often – some never to return. But you also can and must learn that you have everything you need inside yourself.

Mexico was a banquet for her soul, a home she didn’t know she had. She was exhilarated by the culture, the music, the exuberance of the culture, the solidarity of the people. She went to community centers, universities, museums and markets to get to know the people and customs. She loved the paintings at the National Palace and the delicious foods sold at the markets.

At Casa de los Amigos, a Quaker center for international exchanges and collaboration (which also supports rural communities to develop better farming techniques), she joined with her friend Rogelio Cova, who worked with her to take Salvadorans to Mexico to learn composting and soil and water management, organic farming, nutrition, crop selection and seed conservation. These trainees were part of the preparation for her dream to return to El Salvador and create a new and vital relationship between the people and the land, which had been taken away by the conquest and colonial and neocolonial policies. She envisioned a post-civil war society in which the monocultures of coffee, sugar and cotton growing would disappear, to be replaced by a rich agricultural bounty supported by sustainable farming techniques and respect for Mother Earth. This vision of wholeness and peace sustained her through the most difficult times.



Marta’s peace work continued in Mexico City, where she founded MEDEPAZ, Ecumenical Ministries for Development and Peace, a program directed toward ending the war, supporting those touched by the violence and working for development for a durable peace. She remembers she spent one afternoon putting together informational packets for a human rights worker to take with him the following day on a trip to Ecuador, where he was presenting at a continental meeting of human rights and justice and peace workers. Marta finished preparing the packets late that night and wished her friend well on his trip.

But the next morning when Marta returned to the office, she received the distressing message that the diplomat had not arrived as expected in Ecuador. His contacts had arrived at the airport to find him not on the flight, and after checking for other possibilities with negative results, they notified the office in Mexico.

Marta and everyone in the office placed hurried calls – to his home, to the airlines – and learned that her friend had indeed departed Mexico City as planned. As fears deepened, Marta called her contacts in the United States, informing them that this key figure in peace negotiations had disappeared.

Later that day the details were revealed. The man's flight had stopped in Guatemala. Apparently he had been kidnapped there, tortured and murdered. His body was found close to the border with El Salvador.

That afternoon, even as sadness was so present in the feelings and minds of everyone, Marta sat down to write a statement describing the murder and a plan to follow from then on, since he had been scheduled to leave for a tour of advocacy with the U.S. Congress just a week later. A few days later, Marta and others held a memorial service for him, and his companion who was traveling with him, at a service in Washington, D.C., where some of the legislators, trade unionists and church representatives who were to meet with him paid their respects. One more courageous, committed soul murdered because he believed in and worked for peace. His story, Marta remembers, was markedly different in one detail: His body had been found. So many others simply disappeared. This, again, was a message to confirm to those committed to end the war that even outside the country those for war could strike.



During her time in Mexico, Marta returned to El Salvador several times a year, always with “accompaniment” – two or three people who acted as shields or security. These were often Congressional aides, scientists, professors or representatives from human rights groups. They followed a strict procedure: They were never allowed to leave Marta's side and were instructed how to mobilize the network should she be captured.

On her second trip, Marta was accompanied by environmental scientists from the United States and Mexico. The group traveled by bus to various parts of the country, visiting with university professors and observing the declining state of the environment as a result of colonial practices and worsened by the war. On their final day as they were leaving El Salvador at the border to Guatemala, the group was removed from the immigration line, searched and questioned. And then matters got worse.

The group was taken to a nearby army barracks for further questioning. It was 7 a.m. Marta remembers huge dogs and submachine guns in the hands and arms of young male soldiers. But she also remembers that the door was open. She could see through it to people in offices and in the community calmly going about their work. It felt surreal. The door was opened, but she was imprisoned – the people outside moving as if nothing was happening to her and her group, a moment long imagined suddenly becoming fearfully real.

Marta knew the danger for her was far greater than for the others. They might be beaten and thrown out of the country. As a Salvadoran, she could well be tortured and murdered, and as generally happens to women, raped. She knew it was best to lead the way and organized her mind for the task, reminding herself, in order to manage her fear: “This is just a little drop in what eternity is. I, as all humans, am eternal.” She instructed herself not to beg or cry.



In time, she started a conversation with her captives. “You know it’s getting to be lunchtime,” she said. “We’re getting hungry. I could go get us some food and bring it back here.” She refused to acknowledge that she was a prisoner.

She asked to see the officer in charge. He was young, perhaps only 35, and said he was studying to be a lawyer. “I’m a scientist. I was going to Guatemala,” she told him. “I am doing environmental work. Our rights have been violated. We cannot be kept like this.” She was daring him, challenging his authority.

The group was transferred to another garrison, then another, and finally was ominously delivered to San Salvador’s notorious central office of the Treasury Police, known for the brutal torture of innocents. At every stop Marta fortified herself by realizing that the soldiers were only men, and many of them so young, trying to take care of their families. They had these jobs because there were no other options. This knowledge strengthened her long-held belief that her country needed deep change to create opportunities, education and jobs for all Salvadorans. She reminded herself that this was the reason she had joined the peace and justice process for her country. This is the reason she was facing these terrible troubles today.

Marta worked to convert every soldier she encountered, showing them educational materials that described the country’s desperate water issues. “If something isn’t done soon, one-third of the country is going to be a desert by 2025,” she told her captors. “We’re only scientists. You have to let us go.”

She refused to beg for anything. At the central office, the officer in charge put his gun to her stomach and said, “Tell me more about what you’re saying. I live in the area you say will become a desert, and I have never known of this.”

Late that evening, for reasons that remain as murky as their original capture, the group was unceremoniously freed, unharmed. Marta pointed out to the officer how many people appeared murdered in the streets near that garrison. She did not know if that was the plan for herself and group, to be murdered right outside the garrison as they left. She demanded to be driven to a hotel. She needed people inside the garrison to see them boarding a military truck. If something happened to them, someone someday would give testimony of this. An officer drove them in their militarized Jeeps through dangerous streets to a well-known hotel in the capital.

Marta was thankful for this, but she knew that this was not the last step, as something could happen as they left the next day. So she spent much of the night writing in order to document the case – names, places, all aspects – and making arrangements for the document to be picked up.



She returned to El Salvador again in late 1989 with members of the Institute for Policy Studies in the United States and members of other environmental organizations to assess environmental issues in the country. At the time, the FMLN had become increasingly bold, from time to time carrying out major showdowns in the cities and countryside, even taking over the major hotels in San Salvador. In November 1989, the FMLN’s final offensive took over the

capital for a few days. The government had responded with unprecedented levels of violence, including bombing the university and having the military brutally murder six Jesuit priests, their domestic worker and her daughter, at their home inside of the Catholic university. Another unresolved and emblematic case.

Marta spent the day at the university unaware that the FMLN had snuck thousands of fighters into the city and was planning a citywide confrontation against the military. She was near a shopping center that afternoon when a gun battle erupted in front of her, forcing her to run for safety at a nearby gas station. Throughout the city, small FMLN guerilla units were engaging tanks and military units in widespread gunfire. Like Marta, hundreds of others were caught between the FMLN and government and were hiding out and spending the night in places like McDonald's, calling in to radio stations to let their families know they were safe.

For a few days the government retaliated, killing many social movement leaders. Among scores of others who were murdered that night was Marta's friend, Dagoberto, whom she had seen multiple times earlier that day as she moved from meeting to meeting at the national state university's campus. He was a student and photojournalist who had founded a university student group to document this time of the country's history. Marta had been working and supporting the group for a while, engaging foreign correspondents to work with the student photographers and help them obtain cameras and technical expertise. Dagoberto had his hands cut off, and then he was killed.

Another friend, the woman who had founded the Institute for the Study of Gender (IMU), was also murdered that night at her home. Marta spent the next day figuring out how to document these situations and support families, and how to get the foreign members of her team out of the country. It was dangerous to move around in the city and, even worse, to get to the faraway international airport. There was pain and death in hundreds of homes, anguish in funerals. Finally, a few days later, Marta and her team were all able to leave.

### Patience

When Marta returned to El Salvador for good just before the peace accords were signed in 1992, she was overcome with joy. She believed a new nation could now be created that would lift up the indigenous people, the rights of women and all those discriminated against, and the culture and traditions of her country; care for Mother Earth; and strive for a culture of peace. But the reality turned out to be far different.

There was talk of development as the answer to the country's poverty, which filled Marta with the specter of a landscape of Wendy's and Burger King's. Marta watched as many of those who had fought so long for peace now jockeyed for positions of power and money to line their pockets. Corruption was on the rise. More troubling, the violence continued. The peace accords ended the armed conflict, but not the injustices and oppression at the root of the social conflict and the base of the armed conflict.

To resolve the injustice and inequality was the real work needed after the peace agreements, and it still has not been done. It is as if El Salvador suffered a near-fatal disease, but instead of working intentionally on all aspects needed to heal, it continues in the struggle for political power and confrontation – divided, polarized. This is what is most hurtful, Marta reflects, for it hurts the people, the nation, the world.

Marta's family remained abroad; many of her friends had been displaced or killed. She was home alone. She coped by concentrating on her work for sustainable peace, crying at night as she demanded of God to enlighten her about the purpose of living, for the reality of what was going on did not make sense. "When and how do we get to live peace and justice?" she demanded and needed to know.

She remembers one-sided conversations unfolding every night as she returned home from the trainings she imparted in the rural communities. She pressed God for answers: "I have lived my entire life for this and look at it. I don't understand this peace. Is this how we are supposed to be? All these beautiful processes and peace accords and still we are killing each other? To have this kind of life is not worth it. I don't want to go on living if this is what life is for," she would tell God harshly. "Tell me, answer me! How do we make sense of this so that it is worth living?"

Day by day, her words grew more confrontational and demanding: "I don't mind leading the life I have lead. I do not mind the sacrifice. I don't mind whatever is required of me to work for peace for my nation. But you have turned right into wrong, and I am tired of struggling for peace and justice all my life and nothing happens. You better tell me what to do because it is not worth living. I'm not going to kill myself. You take my life, for if this is it, I am ready to die. What do you want? I am demanding that you respond! Where are you? Why don't you say anything?"

These talks with God went on for weeks, until one day that started like any other, Marta received a response. It came from a quiet place deep within her. It said, "*Paciencia, Marta, paciencia.* Patience, Marta, patience." The voice went on, "You don't have to struggle for peace."

Marta questioned, “But if I and all who struggle for peace and justice stop, how will we ever get them?”

The response came: “If it pleases you to fight, to struggle, to build, to work for peace and justice, go ahead and do it. But you do not have to *fight, struggle* or *build* peace and justice.”

Marta went on, “How will we ever have and enjoy peace and justice then?”

“*Be* peace,” was the answer. “Be peace.”

In that moment, the argument was over. She knew better now. It was a qualitative distinction. It was not about doing. It was about being.

Marta cried, this time tears of joy and thankfulness. She kept repeating, slowly, over and over again, “*Paciencia, Marta Benavides, paciencia. Paz-ciencia.* Patience, Marta. Be at peace. Practice the science of peace. Work for peace in a scientific way. Understand how to manifest peace. Manifest peace in all you do. Thus, be peace. Not at peace – be. Be peace.”

She felt consoled in this spiritual process. She had experienced consolation, as concretely as if she had been a small child and her mother were cooing words of comfort over a bruised knee or a broken heart. Her life and work now shone in a positive light – everything felt worth it. Peace not only felt possible, she knew it was possible, for it is a gift of the spirit. It is a given, a way of being, not something to be achieved. Now she knew she could continue her work and she knew how she would do it – by looking for signs of peace and creating the necessary conditions so that her people would be prepared to manifest it, be it, in their everyday lives.



Marta started again, conducting workshops in soil and water conservation and management, in towns where there were agricultural cooperatives with peasant, rural and indigenous communities. In the beginning, she encountered resistance. Although the war was over and the peace accords provided provisions for land reform (including for the first time the right for women to own property), most peasants still had no land. Again and again, the people told Marta that they would take her workshops – once they had land. Without land, why learn the techniques?

Marta knew that the situation was dire. The war-ravaged rural areas were burned out from bombing and nutritionally depleted from decades of coffee and monoculture planting. The air was polluted and the water table dropping annually. One by one, she convinced peasants – the majority of them former coffee pickers – that it was time to prepare their minds and soil for the crops that would follow. She spelled out the new relationship she envisioned between the people and the land that was based on organic farming, composting and sustainable agriculture. Her message began to find a home among indigenous groups and members of the rural people’s movements.

Over time, using patience and tenacity, Marta convinced others to take the time to learn sustainability lessons. She expanded her workshops to include medicinal plants. Once, indigenous people had commonly used plants for medicine and to promote health, but this

knowledge had been almost universally lost. Marta widened the circle of those who knew how to use medicinal plants and nutritional, hygienic and wellness practices instead of chemical medicines and dependence on hospitals and doctors.

Her knowledge found a platform internationally. At the U.N. Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Marta helped create a treaty on environmental education for sustainable communities and global responsibility that focused on right relations and practices between humans, nations and nature. This treaty has been incorporated in the public education system in Brazil. Back home, she worked to engage communities, university students and professors, the ministries of agriculture, environment, education and its secretariat of culture (including the national networks of houses of culture which exist in each municipalities) to help promote practices that would heal the scorched earth and desertification of El Salvador – and the people.



Soon, Marta realized she needed a home base for her workshops and a place to expand. She decided on Nahuizalco, a small town in western El Salvador that is home to the indigenous survivors of a 1932 massacre. She thought a town with such tremendous poverty and so many needs would be a good starting point for rebuilding a nation.

In Nahuizalco, she found a house that was dirty and decrepit but built solidly enough to withstand an earthquake, and had a back patio and some land beyond for gardens. One of her first acts was to plant native Salvadoran balsam trees which now – 20 years later - tower over the house. She began the process of transforming the bare landscape into low-maintenance gardens which include medicinal plants and paths for water to filter and move around the land.

This is the Ecological House and first home for the International Institute for Cooperation Amongst Peoples, also known as the Institute for the 23rd Century. Her intention was to create a place for all people to practice the values of a culture of peace.

In Nahuizalco most people assumed neither she nor her programs would last. Life was difficult. Dangerous gangs roamed the park. Boys as young as 14 joined organized crime syndicates, carried guns and left violent destruction in their wake.

But Marta had no intention of giving up. She began her life there by connecting with the children. Often, as she got off the bus, one or more of the local children would take her hand and ask, “What are we going to do today?” She might answer, “Let’s go to the park and play games like I played when I was little. ‘Cat and Mouse’ and ‘Free the Thief.’”

While Marta loves games and always includes fun activities in her workshops, she had another motive with the children. She wanted to clean up the ugly, trash-filled park. Before they played, she and the children watered the plants, amassed the trash into a huge pile and anointed it a monument to irresponsibility and dumbness. They then placed it in front of the house of culture.

She taught the children to take care of the nearby creek and respect and appreciate the elderly woman who lived nearby, who regularly freed the creek of trash. One day Marta and a group of about 30 young children went to help clean the creek. But first Marta explained to the

children the creek's importance, how it functioned like a human's veins and arteries, cleansing and providing life. After the litter-picking activity, the group celebrated the clean waters by drinking a special beverage made with milk, sugar, cinnamon and fresh ground corn, a recipe known since before the Spanish arrived, and brought a gift to the woman who took care of the creek.

Her inroads with the children began to spill over into other parts of the population. Groups of mothers and fathers started coming to the park on Saturday afternoons when Marta and the children were playing games. To honor them, Marta asked local musicians to bring their instruments and start a program, *Serenades in the Park*, to serenade the mothers of Nahuizalco on Saturday afternoons before they left for Mass. Now the park was filled with mirthful laughter, melodious tunes and happy smiles. A process for being in community.



The Ecological House has become a focal point of life in Nahuizalco. Marta plans conflict transformation, resolution and mediation workshops and programs for reconciliation and reconstruction that focus on rural development and human rights. She brings together youth and children groups for “encounters” in which they share relationships and problems faced by each one of the groups. The house is the epicenter for planning community gardens in schoolyards and parks throughout the area – environmental practices in accordance with the U.N.’s Agenda 21.

Every Sunday after Mass, the house fills with indigenous grandmothers, many of whom still wear their indigenous dress. They come for lunch and to be honored with special programs and visitors before they start the long walk back to their houses. Marta understands the importance of showing respect to the elderly, especially the indigenous peoples and the grandmothers who are one of the most impoverished groups in the country. Manifesting this respect is an important practice of a culture of peace, the ownership and respect for roots and traditional values.

When some of the local rural women wanted to learn to sew, Marta initiated a sewing project that included buying several sewing machines and enlisting teachers to show the techniques needed to make simple pants, shirts and school uniforms for the children. Men asked to become part of the workshops and now many of the trainees have a new way to meet their economic needs.

All Ecological House participants – whether they have attended a conflict transformation workshop or helped plant a garden – are the first to be invited to future programs. In this way, Marta ensures that those most dedicated to the work are able to develop more, and in this way give better and more to the community. One young indigenous man who has taken many classes and now works at Marta’s Aja Folk Arts and Cultures Museum,<sup>11</sup> is now a representative at the municipal and national roundtable for indigenous rights. When he returned, as is the Ecological House practice, he conducted his own class, sharing with others what he had learned and done.



One morning as helpers were busy preparing for a youth encounter at the house, Marta went to fetch the tamales for dinner. She walked the few blocks, paid for the tamales and clutched the hot steamy pot in two hands for the return trip. She decided to take the short cut home, crossing diagonally through the park.

Halfway across, she noticed a very strange quiet had descended. Even the birds had stopped singing. From their windows, she saw people staring at her. Others stood at their front doors, gaping.

She looked left – a pack of sweaty boys, holding the necks of broken beer bottles and rocks, watched her, waiting. She looked right – another pack, similarly armed, also waited. She hesitated, but only briefly. Clutching tightly to her pot, Marta strode between the phalanxes.

As she safely passed, she heard whoops and war cries as the packs resumed their turf war. In spite of all the mess and violence, they showed respect. They allowed her to walk safely. Still, she says, this is the work that must be done: to get all to honor each other, regardless of differences of any type.

### **A Plan for the Day**

In the years following the war, El Salvador was struck by hurricanes, floods, storms and then, in 2001, a powerful earthquake that destroyed what little infrastructure had survived the civil war. Entire towns disappeared from the map. Thousands upon thousands were stranded, their homes buried under mountains of mud. The morning of the quake, Marta heard helicopters overhead, which conjured for her memories of war. But this time the military was engaged in a very different way – rescuing the injured from mountaintops and river bottoms, and heading the major refugee center outside San Salvador.

Again Marta went to work to help refugees. The day after the quake about 10,000 earthquake victims gathered at a hastily erected tent city on the soccer fields of a former coffee plantation not far from her parent's home in San Salvador. Marta arrived at 6 a.m. and saw that the military had already put up tents for the homeless and started to coordinate efforts with the various government and civil society groups who responded to support the people. The Mexican government was the first to respond. They were in El Salvador by dawn the next day with a large team of military personnel, all in their uniforms and wearing aprons, under the leadership of a general. Their task was to feed the people of that encampment. By 8 a.m., a full-scale kitchen had been set up by the Mexican government and a census was being carried out. Two hours later the same team had constructed a mobile medical clinic. This team fed the people for three months, three times a day.

The second nation to arrive with help was Venezuela – again, a team of military people led by a general went to one of the devastated communities in the mountains of La Libertad and brought all necessary equipment and materials needed to rebuild it, in cooperation with the townspeople. This was an incredible experience of solidarity among the people and internationally. The Cuban people who, knowing that the blood banks were empty, offered to donate their blood, but the Salvadoran policymakers rejected the offer due to what they termed ideological differences and the lack of diplomatic relations.

Marta saw the need for coordination. She made a complete tour of the camp, asking people what they needed and noticing any special conditions and needs, jotting everything down. When she returned to the main tent, she coordinated all the volunteers and together they began creating a plan of action. In the following days Marta contacted national groups – secular, religious, governmental and civil society – and asked them for concrete help. Universities and student volunteers were particularly important for these processes to work. All of the people and groups were given trainings related to prevention, mitigation and resolution of the problems being faced and lessons to apply for future work. When representatives from national and international entities and agencies began arriving, Marta was their contact. From her daily rounds, she knew the individual needs of each family of the community and connected each to the people who could help.

Marta worked at the camp every day for more than three months, starting her daily rounds by 6 a.m. and ending by 7 p.m. She helped set up programs to aid the children who were suffering the after effects of the quake. She brought in social workers, psychologists and a legal aid team, and enlisted professionals to give massages and teach relaxation techniques – any need detected was a reason for education. Even the officers and soldiers working in the camp took advantage of the programs she created. Over the months, she saw recovery – the refugees returning home with their knowledge gained, some to entire new towns that had been built for them.

Marta witnessed her country pulling together in a time of crisis thanks to individuals, entities and agencies, both national and international, who were willing to work alongside each other even if some had been former enemies. “In the Bible it says that God said, ‘And it was good.’ And that’s how I felt,” Marta remembers. “Those people never even knew my last name. I wasn’t trying to be known for anything. I wasn’t representing any organization. I was just doing the work. And that paves the way – when you are just doing the work to benefit all. These are the practices of a culture of peace.”



When Marta awakens every morning to her beloved bird songs, she spends some time visualizing the plan for the day. She is often drawn in multiple directions: The Permaculture Farm, now established on her family’s old farm, provides training on soil and water conservation; the Free University she founded plans monthly meetings to educate on issues such as global warming; the Aja Folk Arts and Cultures Museum, dedicated in 2006 to the memory of her parents, is perennially creating new exhibits and developing educational materials in the framework of a culture of peace and the care of Mother Earth – all a contribution to sustainable peace. She also works on environmental issues internationally through various U.N. processes.

Marta is constantly in motion, often traveling, always communicating with colleagues and friends, supporting local, national, continental and global networks for the manifestation of justice and peace. All her work is now guided by a commitment to the manifestation of peace in the here and now, the principles of imagination, creativity, inventiveness and especially sustainability, which depends much on frugality at the core of this practice. She eschews foundation grants and cultivating large donors, believing that great work can be done, and must be done, sustainably without dependence or indebtedness, even with limited resources. In her world, money is always tight, but vision is unlimited.



One simple and creative expression of her work is her gardens. For the last few years, Marta has shown groups and communities how to plant butterfly and hummingbird gardens in parks, clinics, community centers and schoolyards. Planting a garden teaches people to visualize beauty, to coordinate and work together, and show how uniting for a project and working together not only accomplishes the goal but also builds community and caring relations. The gardens themselves are about life and how to respect the web of life.

Because a garden should never be a burden, Marta always plants low-maintenance ones, relying on native plants with resilient natures. In shady areas, impatiens, in brilliant rose and soft pink hues, are a favorite, as are birds of paradise that thrive in sunny spots. Roses are not used too much as they require too much work, fertilizers and pesticides. In order to keep the gardens there has to be a commitment to care and responsible understandings and practices about community, water and soil and seasons – important knowledge for the practices of the culture of peace.

## Epilogue

### *In Marta's own words*

Today, I continue to work on U.N. processes, to support an organization that is meant to guarantee peace and security for all nations and peoples and do the work of peacemaking. I see that it is important to foster a tool for a community of nations that works for human rights, the economic, social and cultural rights of peoples and the care of Mother Earth.

I participate and continue ecumenical work at all levels with all religions and with the commissions, conferences and summits at the United Nations, especially those that relate to sustainability and social development, the International Criminal Court and gender justice in all aspects. I have been very involved in the U.N. Financing for Development process, which works on the financial and economic crisis and its impact on development. For me, the work that the United Nations is doing with food sovereignty, energy and climate change are important aspects of the work for a culture of peace at a personal, local, national, regional and international level.

I understand that all of these aspects must be addressed at the global level through the accompaniment of governments by means of the commissions and committees, the various caucuses, and also at the local, national and regional levels using all the instruments created for this very purpose as the result of civil society pressures. Because I see the importance and impact in the promotion of peace and justice of the World Social Forums, I participate in them at the global, continental and national levels. The forums are part of the work and carrying out of commitments. This is part of my work. It is not activism, but work which I have intentionally carried out as part of the commitment to bring about a culture of peace.

Thus, I continue to educate myself in order to contribute with others to create the possible other world so needed and wanted. One concrete way I do this is by integrating the international, global work with the Folk Arts and Culture Museum I founded and direct in El Salvador. In conjunction with this, I see my peacemaking story as continually working and remaining committed to providing spaces for members at all levels of society to discern important and relevant issues, such as climate change and its impact on the world, and a *solidarious*<sup>12</sup> economy as an alternative way of life that is equitable, socially responsible and caring for all.

My commitment has also led to the creation and founding of the International Free University for Peace, the Permaculture Farm, the Ecological House, conferences on emerging and challenging issues, network and community building, organic farming, work with students, children, youth, women and the indigenous grandmothers.

The international work and all the work that I carry out in my country with the various programs, processes and projects are to bring about this culture, a culture of peace, which is the work of sustainability that results in durable peace. My peacemaking story is rooted in my understandings,<sup>13</sup> in a journey that knows that this work is not in vain and that peace is a possibility for all humanity – it is a matter of manifesting it in all we do.

Still as this is the challenge, I am content as I wake up to a new day; I am so grateful for the work ahead. There is only gratefulness for the universe, the bird songs I hear by my open

window as they greet a new dawn, the beauty of nature and the challenges to prepare for. As I think of when I was a child, I am aware of how much I experienced and the under-standings I now have. I celebrate and am thankful for each new under-standing, for how far I have come. I have been able to experience and make the choices of love for people and nature.

I realize that I have worked, and still work, with people of so many backgrounds, age, religions, nationalities, careers and concerns. As I have met them and got to know them, I have also known friendship, caring, loyalty, dreams. Many of these friends ask me to write the experiences and discern my lifetime, to put in writing much of what I share with them: my evolution in this lifetime as a peacebuilder, peace worker, and how I came to the under-standing that there is no way to peace, that being peace is the way. I am asked to make sense of this new era and how to respond to the challenges, especially peace challenges that come from that.

To work for peace and justice in societies which value possessions and consumerism can be a very trying experience, because that is what is promoted, sold to the peoples and nations in the world. Thus, the ways to create balances and keep the clarity to go on is essential. This is the key to the path of peace, and one must be about this every day. It is not about optimism, nor faith. It is about having come to a certainty – with no doubt – that this is one's way, and that this is the contribution you are to make here on earth. It is about being able to see the vision, the light that is much farther than the day, the year, the working on the issues, or even present needs, and for that light and vision to guide one's work to impact the seventh generation and beyond. To know – not to believe, but to know – that this is your call, your challenge, and then to be ready to carry it out in a most creative way, in joy, so you can be about your path and create possibilities so that society in its entirety can be about this nationhood project – the durable, sustainable peace project.

I know clearly that peacemaking is really about living everyday the culture of peace. Culture manifests what we understand, what is important to us, and thus what choices to make and how to carry them out. Culture is the manifestation of our inner selves as persons, societies and nations. Thus, we manifest peace through choices and actions. It is this under-standing that leads me to affirm that there is no way to peace, that peace is the way, and to see the contradictions inherit in concepts such as “building,” “struggling,” “waging peace” or even “peacemaking.” The concept guides the thinking and the action.

I see that what matters is to work to make possible the paradigm shift, for this is not an era of change, but a change of an era. What does that mean, and why and how do we shape this new era instead of letting it happen to us? How do we work with and manifest this under-standing of peace as the way? And how do I manifest this under-standing in my life, my ministry in today's world for Mother Earth, for today's humanity and the future of it?

## **A CONVERSATION WITH MARTA BENAVIDES**

*The following is an edited transcript of an interview conducted by IPJ Executive Director Milburn Line during a public event on Oct. 13, 2009, in the Peace & Justice Theatre of the IPJ. The transcript includes questions from the audience.*

**Q: How did you get your start in social movements?**

A: It depends on what you mean by social movements. As a small girl I lived in a society that suffered and still suffers impoverishment. In my family, my mom and dad educated us about issues of social justice. They told us you are here on Earth and you need to prepare yourself for two things: the global common good, which means human rights, and global common goods – all that is in nature and taking care of Mother Earth. From the time I was very little, I was helped to see everything through stories my mother and father told. My family was always committed to issues of justice and peace because of the terrible inequalities we faced: oppression of women and peasants, the government's irresponsible social policies, the lack of care of Mother Earth and all of nature. I honestly can say that peacemaking has been my life – it has been at the center of everything I do. I thank my family and specifically my mother and dad for this light, practice and experience.

**Q: When did you begin to work formally for peace?**

A: After studying in the United States in the 1960s, I began to manifest peace in a more systematic way, implementing processes for a culture of peace and in the development of dialogue and negotiations for political solutions to the conflict in El Salvador. I worked with Monsignor Óscar Romero directing the Ecumenical Committee for Humanitarian Aid (CEAH) program, which started the refugee centers in El Salvador and developed campaigns to stop the war and defend human rights.

My work then led me to join the various U.N. processes, such as the Commission for Social Development, Commission for Sustainable Development, Education for Sustainability, UNESCO Decade for a Culture of Peace and the Decade of Non-Violence. All of these address at a policy and global level the importance of conflict resolution and peacemaking as viable solutions for nations around the world. I have also seen peacemaking as a viable process that needs to be part of the ecumenical movements at various levels, and this work has taken me to participate in the World Council of Churches, based in Geneva, Switzerland, and the National Council of Churches in the United States.

**Q: What are some examples of issues that have been influenced by working in this way?**

A: Many of the concerns or processes I have worked on for peace and justice have become realities in my lifetime, though often those of us who worked and even put our lives in danger to bring them through thought we might never see them resolved in our own lifetime. I saw César Chávez' United Farm Workers' victory after a lot of struggle and repression and even death from sicknesses related to pesticides and poor living conditions, or beatings of the workers who were on strike. I saw the International Criminal Court finally open its doors and start to work to prevent crimes against humanity and crimes of war and genocide, while a committee, the gender justice caucus of women, made sure that rape, forced prostitution and forced pregnancy were

included as crimes of war. Another one is the war in El Salvador ending with the signature of the peace accords in 1992, led by the United Nations. It was the first of its kind and is now considered an example for that type of process in the world. This work and experience made it possible for many in my country and abroad to learn about politics and how to press effectively for change.

**Q: How would you describe your faith?**

A: My mom and dad were constantly pointing out that faith was of the spirit and teaching us to respond with respect for all things in life. We lived in San Salvador and my mother created all these beautiful gardens. Jasmine is a very special plant that grows in El Salvador. She planted it next to our bedrooms, so we could sleep with and wake up to that smell. In what can be considered my faith belief, I am rooted in the power that we have to be like the Creator Spirit, we are creators. “We create how we live and as we live,” my mother always said. We have to be intentional about it, conscious of this power that we are. And here I like to reflect on the saying, “Live simply so others can simply live.” This is a saying in the North, but we, those from impoverished conditions, want to live simply, too – not simply live, that is just barely surviving. Please think what this means for your daily living and the foreign policies of your country.

**Q: You studied in the United States for many years during the 1960s and ‘70s. What are your memories of this time?**

A: I went to a small, private Baptist college in Pennsylvania. As I faced the U.S. culture and society as a science, premed major, I learned about discrimination, racism, slavery, plantations and the American dream, which I understood as: to get, to have and to waste. I did not like this dream because I could see the unequal relations between my country and the United States. These unequal relations were very much at the root of our poverty and impoverishment, and at the root of making the American dream possible. The fortunes of the United States depend very much on our impoverishment and our suffering injustice. Bolivians say today that they are impoverished because of their “misfortune” of being such a rich country in terms of natural resources. Industrialized nations go after our natural wealth. This is a structural, societal problem.

I then decided to work on processes and ways to bring about wholeness that is not about medicine, but health, wellness, wholeness. I took classes and created the experiences that allowed me to be about that, and decided that my work had to be about healing and creating a healthy society at home and the world, and not about just getting a degree and then proceeding to get a job.

**Q: Why did you decide to go to Baptist seminary?**

A: I went to seminary because I wanted to find out about the teaching of the church because the people in the churches don’t live the teaching of the Bible. I live for a different world. In that process I participated in the World Council of Churches, an ecumenical movement, even as a foreign student in the United States. These processes were about justice for people. That focus got me participating in many commissions, working on racism, human rights and with migrant farm workers.

Once oppression and repression got worse in my country, we worked to develop solidarity for our people with those in the United States and other nations. That was when I began writing to Monsignor Romero, the archbishop who was murdered in my country. Monsignor was a very humble man. He studied a lot and learned to figure out all the situations of that time. He developed and grew as a result of his experiences and commitment. I wrote to him to let him know that people in the United States, Europe and around the world who were involved in human rights issues were watching him with much care and support. When we met, he asked me, “When can you come back to El Salvador and help me?” I said, “Whenever you need me.” And he responded, “Right now.” So I returned to the United States, gave my things away and went back to work in accompaniment to his ministry.

**Q: Monsignor Romero encouraged you to be ordained as a Baptist minister. Why do you think he wanted that for you?**

A: When I reflect on these things, I think about how he was always calling us as a people to be united. I think for him it was very important to have me, a woman from a Protestant faith, and him, a Roman Catholic archbishop, working together as a sign of that kind of unity. It seems to me also that in this way, he expressed or manifested his view with regard to women’s ordination to the ministry.

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*“[Monsignor Romero] was always calling us as a people to be united. I think for him it was very important to have me, a woman from a Protestant faith, and him, a Roman Catholic archbishop, working together as a sign of that kind of unity.”*

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**Q: What are your thoughts on his legacy?**

A: We cannot just have the preferential option for the poor; it must really be the preferential option for life – in this way everyone can have the right to live in dignity. Right now in my country when I go out of my house, I could be killed any day at any time because violence is so high in El Salvador. It is happening all over the world. This is part of what I’m working for, so everyone in El Salvador and the world can have an equal chance to live a peaceful and dignified life in a healthy environment.

Monsignor’s commitment to the preferential option for the poor made him try to understand the conditions and what created them and which resulted in poverty, injustice and suffering for the great majorities of our people and, for that matter, the majority of people of the world. He learned it was a systemic problem, and he denounced it and called for change. This is his call, which is still very up to date.

**Q: After the war, many were disappointed with the peace accords, the U.N. truth commission and the government giving amnesty to the Salvadoran army. Can you comment about that disappointment?**

A: When there is a history of oppression and repression the people are awake and they want changes. When there is a military dictatorship, we want that to change. For us the colonial period took away a lot. The industrial nations have a moral debt because through colonial and new colonial practice, they enslaved us and took our resources, forcing us to work for nothing.

In the 1970s, the United Nations declared El Salvador to be in the hunger belt, meaning that people were actually dying of hunger. Do we just accept this? Because of these conditions, the people started to organize and demand changes and then, as a result of that, they were oppressed. It's like the situation when there is a young kid who is a bully in school and nothing is done in the school to stop it. The only thing left for that kid who is being bullied is to say, "I'm going to fight." And that's what we had to do. We were able to create conditions that would have them recognize us as a powerful force to contend with.

Because of that, our movement influenced Mexico and France to bring the issue to the United Nations and we later got the peace accords (negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations). I know that they're not the best, but it was the best we could do. It is an example of how to solve such situations peacefully. El Salvador was the first to bring about this process successfully, to solve a civil war through U.N.-sponsored dialogue and negotiations, achieving a political solution. In this way the peace accords are so important and should be at the center of our education.

The government amnesty is something we continue to struggle with. This is a situation that needs to be corrected. Our Supreme Court is very conservative and doesn't want to deal with it. So, as people, any place we can take this issue to, we take it. We have this issue before the Supreme Court of our country. The amnesty law must be derogated. The peace accords must be brought to life for real restoration and reconciliation of our nation to happen.

**Q: There are continued issues of security in El Salvador.**

A: Right now, El Salvador is one of the most violent countries in the Americas, so just getting the peace accords is not enough. But now we have Wendy's and Domino's Pizza and the big, big corporations. We have the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank forcing us into debt and the government not solving the problems of the country. All this came as part of the negotiations to end the armed conflict. It was pressure by investors.

Right now, young people don't have opportunities at home. We have all these gangs, mostly made up of those people who went to the United States and had to live in impoverished communities, and then they are deported back to El Salvador. They found themselves having to fight with the already established gangs and had to become even worse than the original gangs.

We must commit to education for a culture of peace. This would mark a path – in our country that means caring for Mother Earth, stopping consumerist practices, having an economy that is responsible and caring, respecting the dignity and rights of peoples and communities.

**Q: How would you describe your philosophy of peacebuilding?**

A: Each one of us here on Mother Earth enacts our “under-standings,” in other words the values and principles each person is standing over. The way we under-stand is how we create the world we live in. Each of us must realize that we are creators and that is our “in-heritance” – this quality is inherent in each of us; it is a gift of the Spirit. We always create, though most often than not we create in unconscious ways, not always aware of what we are doing. Thus, we are peacemaking or not, all of the time. It is not only when we fight against injustice or for human rights, women’s rights. All those struggles are very good contributions. But it is in the everyday living that we must manifest this congruence. We must live a *solidarions*<sup>14</sup> life, based on the centrality of the care for Mother Earth and the well-being of humanity and all living beings. This framework demands a solidarions economy, which does not exploit people or Mother Earth in order to meet human needs. Thus, peacemaking results from being peace, from living the culture of peace all the time.

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*“... peacemaking results from being peace, from living the culture of peace all the time.”*

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**Q: As you consider the world, at what juncture of peacemaking do you see us?**

A: I feel the urgent need to figure out the work ahead. We are at a point in history where we must decide to stop destroying that which guarantees life as we know it in the planet, if we are to continue living as humanity. The various crises that we and all nations have faced in the last few years – crises which continue to challenge each nation and the whole world – point to a need for drastic change. The financial and economic crises have forced us to look with critical eyes at the new conditions and quality of life of people everywhere. We also need to look at the challenges to sustainability and peace presented by the production and consumption patterns of the nations that waste and exploit the majority of the world’s resources. The energy crisis continues to press us for the need to have solar power and other non-fossil fuel types of energy. We are facing very dangerous times. As global citizens, we need to read the signs of the times and decide to govern ourselves, to govern our governments and industries that continue to pillage nature and peoples. We must acknowledge this and take ownership of it.

**Q: Can you describe your vision of the 23rd century?**

A: When I went back to El Salvador and the war was over, I talked with lots of people about what it would take to make and enjoy peace in our country. People always said it would take a long time to create a new kind of country. Many times they said it would take about 200 years. “That’s the 23rd century,” I would say to them. Then I issued a challenge, “Let’s see what kind of things we can start doing now that would be like societies in the future, in the 23rd century for example. Let’s use our imagination and project into the future and decide what we want to be like so we can enjoy peace.” As we enact those ways or trends of the future, we are actually changing the past and creating a different present and future if we enact what we envision. That was the philosophy of indigenous people before the coming of the colonizers. Each time



indigenous people made a choice, they always thought about the impact on the seventh generation. I think we must follow that example; it is urgent to do so.

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*“Each time indigenous people made a choice, they always thought about the impact on the seventh generation. I think we must follow that example; it is urgent to do so.”*

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**Q: Which of your projects has been most effective in bringing about peace?**

A: There are many programs, for example, the 23rd Century Free University for Peace. Anyone working for social transformation can come and learn about the issues and programs we work with at this university. We bring in experts to talk about food sovereignty and security, climate change, the Millennium Development Goals, the ICC and other topics, and link them with what we are doing and going to do personally and in community at any level. We also hold “Conversations” in various universities and bring up issues such as the ICC, the solidary economy, climate change, the Millennium Development Goals.

At the Folk Arts and Culture Museum we look for beauty and create the exhibits from materials that we recycle, and use everyday arts and crafts. The people see us picking up trash in the streets and making something beautiful out of it. At the Permaculture Farm and the Ecological House we partner with other groups in the communities all the time to show complete processes for permaculture, erosion control, water filtering and composting. I participate in the U.N. and civil society processes at all levels – local, regional, national and international. And then I work to have the members of the movements to which I belong to participate at those levels too.

**Q: How do you recommend going from understanding to acting on an issue?**

A: It's love that makes you feel you have to get up and go. We're not here just to see life go by. You start wherever you are. We start at 4:30 in the morning and go out to take care of the gardens. Do it out of love, to make a contribution for the common good and global common goods. Think, dream and act. Have a delicious life, and don't be afraid to live it. Once one understands, one must make the commitment to follow that light. One must figure out the path and how to walk it.

## **PEACEBUILDING PRACTICES – Practices that Made Sense to Marta to Carry on Her Work**

The basis of much of Marta's work is the under-standing that we are placed on Earth to create meaning and not let life blow you along on the wind. It is important to gather information, analyze that information and think it through by yourself and with others, form an opinion, come to a conclusion guided by a commitment to be mindful on how one's actions will impact on oneself, humanity and Mother Earth. If a conclusion you make turns out not to be right, you can always go back and fix it. The important thing is that you make a decision based on intentionality and mindfulness and on what you knew at that time. This is the nature of the practice of discernment. Marta explains that in Spanish discernment is a compound word: *discernir*. *Cernir* means "spreading things out" – the way you might put flour through a sieve in preparation for making bread. The preposition *dis* means to "undo what you did," or, in this example, amassing the flour to make the dough, bringing the flour together.

It is an apt word for Marta's orientation to her work. She practices discernment using the two-step process inherent in the word's compound meaning. First, spread everything out to look at every aspect of it. Second, bring it back together to form a conclusion. "This is how to create mindfulness, of being intentionally aware and responsible for your understanding."

In particular, discernment is at the heart of Marta's concept of the 23rd century. This approach manifests the present by intentionally creating programs and activities based on envisioning a beautiful life on Earth 200 years hence. By visualizing the future you wish to see and creating programs that will make that vision a reality, you can change the past, influence the present and create a different future. The real key in Marta's approach is to do it now with discernment and intentionality.

Outlined below are some of the practices Marta has used in her work almost all her life, grouped into four categories: concrete projects, cooperative ventures, political action and spiritual practices. Between her projects and practices are many linkages and interrelationships, this is always circular. Always, one project was built on another, each growing from the experiences created in the past, and each conceived to bring forth a more peaceful and joyful future. To manifest a culture of peace, with a commitment to contribute to build her nation, by doing social transformation through culture, she has a commitment for community building as a way to achieve this transformation. For this purpose, it is important to simplify, to organize, and build alliances and work cooperatively, mobilizing internal resources, and to depend the least on support from foundations, yet get committed support from a circle of friends inside and outside our country.

The work/projects carried out must always be about circular practice. Think and act globally, so one can act at the personal, local, national, regional and international levels, and in this way, impact globally.

As a practice, all funds to support each project come from in-kind contributions, personal contributors and by developing alliances and cooperation.

**Concrete Projects**

<b>PROJECT</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>METHOD</b>
Training small farmers and peasant cooperatives in soil conservation and water management. Conducted in various provinces in central and western El Salvador.	An intensive, three-day training for men and women of the board of the cooperatives and other interested people on various issues, which began with an explanation of why we need the training: El Salvador is undergoing very advanced desertification, erosion and deforestation, and water is polluted and not accessible to the people. Created an understanding of the historic reasons for the situation and challenged participants to take the training and then implement and practice their knowledge.	Identified towns that were suffering from lack of land rights and other problems the training addressed. Visited communities and invited potential participants to be in a circle of fun with games for the children, telling stories, picking up trash. Then the people were open to the visit. Ate together with a small group of people to talk about the concept with the leading people of the cooperatives, making sure women, young people and older people participated. Able to identify other topics for additional workshops, such as nutrition, gender issues and conflict transformation. Workshops were provided at no charge.
Conflict transformation workshops. Provided in various provinces in western and central El Salvador.	Three-day intensive workshop of fun and discernment on how to work for transformation, resolution and mediation of conflicts. Transformation is a more encompassing training that provides opportunities for individuals and groups to develop a higher understanding of how to relate to each other. Follow-up was provided to facilitate networking, mutual support and other training needs.	Groups were notified of the dates and purpose of the training and asked to select two individuals to participate, making sure women, older people and youth were included. Others invited were representatives from churches, the mayor's office, House of Culture, National Civil Police, Justice of Peace and public schools. Trainer who was fluent in Spanish was provided by the Mennonite Central Committee of the United States. A slow food movement meal was provided and many games were incorporated and provided free of charge. As a result of these workshops, issues of land rights were better addressed by universities and justices of the peace. As a result, the program was also provided by the

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION	METHOD
		Ministry of Education on a regional and national level for public school teachers, and the state university provided it to teachers in training.
Ecological House, established in Nahuizalco.	A place where people of all ages come to take trainings on soil and water conservation and management, gender issues, economics and spirituality, and where “encounters” are offered for children, youth and adults, rural and urban.	Identified the need for a designated place to hold trainings. Fixing it up involved every possible person, including both urban and rural children and adults. Each training included time to work on the low-maintenance gardens, which are now well-known in the community for soil and water management and as a place of solace.
Indigenous grandmothers’ Sunday lunch at the Ecological House.	Indigenous grandmothers walk from many villages to Sunday morning Mass. To honor them as representatives of our roots, a lunch is prepared for them following church so they are nourished before they walk home.	Each grandmother was visited at church and the Sunday street market to explain to them the purpose of the lunch and what they could expect. At their request, no photographs are taken of them. They are invited to other events and there are special celebrations and meals for them on holidays such as Mother’s Day and Christmas.
Permaculture Farm in San Salvador.	Restoration of a piece of land that was devastated by the war. It is part of greater San Salvador and is a small farm that the Benavides family owns. It is used to provide a place for water filtering for clean water and to elevate the water table, for biodiversity of animals and plants and to educate people on the philosophy of permaculture – a philosophy and practice to work with the restoration and maintenance of the Earth.	Created a one-day activity for schools, universities and other groups to learn about sustainable development, U.N. Agenda 21 and food sovereignty and security. The day includes a slow food movement meal and games. Workshops conducted at the Ecological House are also offered here. An indigenous family displaced by the war serves as caretakers.

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION	METHOD
Aja Folk Arts and Culture Museum and the Culture of Peace Center. Located in Santa Ana, the second largest city in El Salvador.	The museum is a way of honoring and recognizing the creativity of common people and working intentionally through using folk arts and culture to educate for a culture of peace. The name of the museum comes from visitors saying, “Aha!” after understanding what the exhibits are about. It is open five days a week, with guided tours by volunteers, and is free of charge. It was created by Marta and her sisters in memory of their parents.	Found and purchased an abandoned house and fixed it up to be a place of beauty. Visited communities and schools to inform people about it. Developed media campaign. Created a Web page and blog. Exhibits are created at the museum from found objects and relate to major concerns such as climate change and water rights. Student volunteers are given scholarships for school bus transportation.
Free 23rd Century University for Peace. Located in Santa Ana.	Once a month, participants meet to be brought up to date on major issues on a local, regional, state and global level, such as the financial and economic crisis and the impact on development, climate change and food sovereignty. The university also sponsors “Conversations” in San Salvador at the university and in alliance with various groups.	Individuals of various networks in the country and region are contacted and encouraged to participate in the monthly discussions. Meetings are not open to the public, but reserved for individuals who are committed to and work on social transformation. Bring in experts who participants would not ordinarily have a chance to meet. Meetings include a slow food movement meal.
Community gardens	Created gardens at the Ecological House and also in the public parks, schools, neighbors’ front yards and clinics to demonstrate sustainable development, beauty and art.	Identified places where a community garden could be planted through collaborative efforts. Ask the institutions if they would accept the project. Form a team of people to work and create designs together. Use donated plants and used bricks and stones. Create the garden in one day and follow up with maintenance. All gardens are low-maintenance to conserve water. Apply it to U.N. Agenda 21.

**Cooperative Efforts**

<b>PROJECT</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>METHOD</b>
Work on the impact of free trade agreements	Free trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), are legally binding, official processes between governments for the purpose of trade. Before the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) became official, a forum was created in El Salvador for discussion of its potential impacts, in the context of the NAFTA experience and the upcoming Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agreement.	For the forum in El Salvador, brought the person who had led the analysis of NAFTA for the Mexican government. Salvadorans from the universities, schools of economics and business, NGOs, human rights and women's groups, media and legislators were invited. The Mexican expert was interviewed on television, radio and newspaper following the forum. The purpose was to put everyone around the table, put it on civil society's agenda and launch a process so the nation could begin to discuss CAFTA-DR and FTAA.
International Criminal Court – Gender Justice	A workshop and public presentation were held to discuss the need for governments to ratify the statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which works to prevent and punish crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. The Women's Committee on Gender Justice worked to have the ICC include gender issues such as mass rape, forced pregnancies and sexual assaults during war time as war crimes and crimes against humanity.	Invited media, universities, the supreme court, judges, NGOs, legislators and other interested persons to the workshop, and the public to the presentation. Created opportunities for experts to be interviewed by a variety of media. The purpose was to put ratification on the country's agenda and to make sure all key players in the government and civil society knew about it. The result of this process was the creation of the Salvadoran Coalition for the Ratification of the International Criminal Court, to educate the public and press the government to ratify. This work continues at the national, Central American regional and global levels for ratification and monitoring of implementation.
Participation in networks	Join processes on national, regional and global levels for the purpose of enriching and strengthening them, in order to accomplish the agreed objectives of peace, justice and human fulfillment.	Marta's activities: American Friends Service Committee (AFSC): International peacebuilding unit to create demilitarization programs and culture of peace.

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION	METHOD
		<p>AFSC-Third World Coalition: Brings together Third World staff and committee members to support the rights of workers on issues related to racism, sexism, justice, affirmative action and education in general.</p> <p>National Council of Churches (NCC-USA): Agricultural missions worldwide to support and accompany people in rural movements for land rights, gender concerns, food security and autonomy.</p> <p>Highlander Center: Educates people at international and national levels on issues related to human rights, cultural rights of people and organizing for effective social change, based on a human rights framework.</p> <p>World Social Forums: National, regional and global levels to cooperate in creating an understanding and proposals for creating a world of peace and justice and care of the planet.</p> <p>Create the Salvadoran Coalition in support of the International Criminal Court and be active in the global campaign for the creation of the ICC and the Central American Coalition.</p>
16 Days of Education on Nonviolence against Women	International campaign from November 25 to December 10 each year to educate about nonviolence against women and that women's rights are human rights.	In the Latin American women's network, women from the Dominican Republic shared their program that commemorates the murder of three women activists, the Mirabal sisters (on November 25). At the U.N. World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the program was shared with the transnational women's movement and adopted as a campaign of 16

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION	METHOD
		<p>Days of Nonviolence against Women, beginning on November 25 and ending on December 10, the International Day of Human Rights. The United Nations then adopted it as a campaign as well.</p> <p>It is important to participate in the networks in such a way that the local work is done, but can impact the global level – as shown in this particular example.</p>

### **Political Efforts**

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION	METHOD
Promotion to achieve peace through dialogue and negotiating peace accords to end the armed conflict in El Salvador	An international and national process under the auspices of the United Nations to create conditions for a political settlement of the conflict through dialogue and negotiation.	Learned the historical process that preceded the conflict and about the need for an international process of dialogue and negotiation. Developed materials and programs to educate people about the need for dialogue and negotiation at the national and international levels. Mobilized a campaign with key partners inside the country and with the international community. Gave the appropriate follow-up.
Join a political party	Actively participate in a political party.	Study the constitution of the party and join the different processes going on, in an intentional way. Through your analysis, work to have a presence in the group; dialogue, debate and carry out the work.
Develop solidarity committees	Create a group of concerned persons on a particular issue and educate them about it.	Get information. Find other people who are interested or working in that area. Have committee meetings to develop the analysis and positions. Think about how to effectively reach other people so they make informed decisions about the information you are presenting to them.



PROJECT	DESCRIPTION	METHOD
Letter-writing campaigns	A committee identifies who should be contacted to lobby for particular concerns and monitors developments after letters are sent.	The committee works to figure out how to reach decision makers effectively and coordinates with other groups that are working on the same issues.
Join coalitions	Join a group of people committed to working on a single issue, such as water rights in a community.	Look for those people who are working on the issue and join together to develop actions such as marches, vigils or media campaigns.
Civil society at the United Nations	Civil society groups monitor various processes at the United Nations to assure that the rights and needs of the people are respected and taken into account in the official documents.	Learn the techniques to affect the negotiations of the governments. Join with various caucuses to develop positions and press for language that manifests those positions.

### Spiritual Practices

PROJECT	DESCRIPTION	METHOD
Follow a spiritual path	Take time daily to be in solitude and discern your work for the day.	Early in the morning, take time to give thanks and know that your work is blessed, and that you know where you are coming from and where you need to go. Take time during the day to reconnect with that. At the end of the day, read, study and reflect on your commitment.
Be a good friend		Appreciate your friends, cultivate your relationships, keep them in your heart. Visit your friends, laugh with them and share your concerns with them.
Take time for solitude	Take time to be with yourself, to be quiet and in beauty.	Put time for retreats or solitude in your agenda and make sure you do it. Hang a hammock, if you can, and look at the sky. Work and think. Take good books and listen to the silence.
Make the connections	Connect the dots concerning issues to be shared, researched, consulted and thought about.	Read about the issues and know how they are portrayed in the media and how it impacts the life of people and the planet.

<b>PROJECT</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>METHOD</b>
Don't wait for money	Make a commitment even if you don't have money to carry it out.	Organize and the money will show up. Money follows program. Do things the cheapest way, but not cheaply.
Have opinions	Don't shy away from firm beliefs.	Have a frame of reference, of character and integrity that you come from. Look for ways to strengthen your character.
23rd century concept	Creating because it is our legacy. It is an understanding that we are always creating for the future.	Become an intentional creator of your power and creativity. Know what you are living for by searching your heart and applying your mind to bring it about. When heart and mind come together, you manifest the magical being that you are.
Be mindful of language	Language manifests how things and life are understood. Words direct the way one works.	Be observant and aware of language and expressions present in life. Always use gender-inclusive pronouns.
Mentorship	Make sure that accompaniment of persons and organizations is provided according to needs, aspirations and possibilities.	Send timely information and give support as much as possible so that interested people and organizations can participate in U.N. and regional processes relating to, for example, sustainable development, climate change and water rights.

**FURTHER READING –**  
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**BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER –**  
**LEIGH FENLY**

Leigh Fenly is co-founder and co-president of Women's Empowerment International, a nonprofit organization based in San Diego that has funded more than \$250,000 in microfinance loans and business services to women in poverty in Honduras, Mexico, Benin and San Diego. Her work with the organization has taken her to Mexico and Honduras, where she spent time with women who have dramatically improved their lives – and even sent their children to college – by using small loans to start businesses. Fenly is a writer and journalist with a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas and an M.F.A in Writing from Vermont College of Norwich University. She has written extensively about social issues, medicine and science and was the former Quest Editor at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. She currently works as a birth doula, assisting women and their partners to have successful and calm labor experiences.



Photo credits: Patricia Rogers

## **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**

<b>AFSC</b>	American Friends Service Committee
<b>ARENA</b>	Nationalist Republican Alliance
<b>CEAAL</b>	Latin American Council for Adult Education
<b>CEAH</b>	Ecumenical Committee for Humanitarian Aid
<b>COMADRES</b>	Committee of Mothers Monsignor Romero
<b>DRU</b>	Revolutionary Unified Directorate
<b>ENLACE</b>	Education Networking for Latin American Cooperation and Empowerment
<b>FDR</b>	Democratic Revolutionary Front
<b>FMLN</b>	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
<b>ICAE</b>	International Council on Adult Education
<b>ICC</b>	International Criminal Court
<b>IFCO</b>	Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization
<b>IPJ</b>	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
<b>MEDEPAZ</b>	Ecumenical Ministries for Development and Peace
<b>NCC</b>	National Council of Churches
<b>PYA</b>	Puerto Rican Youth for Action
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USD</b>	University of San Diego
<b>WCC</b>	World Council of Churches

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Eastern Baptist College is now known as Eastern University.

<sup>3</sup> Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary is now known as Palmer Theological Seminary.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations not cited in the text are taken from interviews with Marta Benavides between Sept. 17 and Nov. 6, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> According to the constitution at the time, Roman Catholicism was the official religion. The same was true for Spanish as the official language, in detriment of the native languages, which Salvadoran ancestors were forced to forget, for controlling purposes and supposedly to civilize the people.

<sup>6</sup> According to Marta, the Tomayate River is neither robust nor healthy because of toxic waste dumped there by industries which have been protected and promoted by uncaring governments and national armies who respond only to foreign interests. “This is development, we are told,” Marta reflects. Recently near the river, fossils of mastodons have been found and are exhibited at the Anthropological Museum.

<sup>7</sup> The Ecological House is discussed in more detail in the narrative section “Patience.”

<sup>8</sup> According to the Web site of the Division for Sustainable Development in the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Agenda 21 is a comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the United Nations System, Governments, and Major Groups in every area in which human impacts on the environment.” Please see [www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/](http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/) for more information.

<sup>9</sup> The women remained friends even after the woman left the country with her grown children and went into exile in Canada during the war.

<sup>10</sup> Marta has since visited the peasant community named for Ita Ford. Ita’s family, especially her brother Bill, a U.S. lawyer, continued to work for the case to come to justice, both in El Salvador and the United States. But he died and did not see this happen. No justice has been done for the thousands of murders, including those of the Jesuit priests, Monsignor Romero, the church women, the victims of the Mozote massacre. Marta believes this is a key aspect to be dealt with for real forgiveness and reconciliation, for the healing of the nation.

<sup>11</sup> The museum is described in more detail in the table of peacebuilding practices.

<sup>12</sup> *Solidarious* is a word Marta often uses, a conglomeration of the English “solidarity” and the Spanish “solidario.”

<sup>13</sup> Understanding is a compound word. Marta prefers the spelling “under-standing,” because, she says, “When you really pay attention to it, it tells us about what we are standing over – our values, our foundation.”

<sup>14</sup> See footnote #11.