Rachel Rothgery – Unseen, Unheard: A Short Film About the Deaf and Blind in Xela, Guatemala

Winter Term 2008

Expenses:
$ 727.30 roundtrip airfare between Oregon and Guatemala (the only cost I'm for which seeking recompensation.)
$ 49.00 Digital Audio Recorder
$100.00 monthly rent in Casa Internacional (never received receipt, though I requested one repeatedly)
Around $200 for food (mostly ate street food – no receipts given)

For winter term, I failed my first attempt at being a radio journalist.

First off, the kindly philanthropist woman who lived along the Arizona border flew to the UK unexpectedly for a family emergency, and I could no longer stay with her for January. The Mexico border project was now unaffordable to me. So I bought a ticket to Guatemala where I could stay with my ex-boyfriend for only $100 a month.

Exactly two years ago, I fled the states to Guatemala. Within the first year of my Oberlin education, my first love died unexpectedly, my roommate checked into a clinic for anorexia, and my search for distraction from the loss of these two people acted like a vacuum, inviting in all the petty fits and academic posturing of the new environment around me. I tried to bury my anger and emptiness in food. I binged and purged in private, the shame of which perpetuated break downs. A place like Guatemala represented to me a return to clearer problems. To serve the poor would remind me of my hope for a more compassionate world. The resilience of the people around me might inspire my recovery, and I could forget about my disappointment in the brooding comportment of my classmates.

But of course it's easier to flee to another country in search of fulfillment rather than sit in place and confront life. The resilience of many impoverished people which I romanticize may be due in great part to their immobility. Without the hope of fleeing, there is less time wasted plotting escapes, less money wasted on self-help books and beauty products which promise transcendence from our greatest afflictions and always fail us.

And yet, in Guatemala, I found no less self-deception. The beggars stand stiff against building walls like statues bronzed in dust. Their eyes will ask nothing from those passing, will not judge the injustice about them -- they are welded shut. Relaxed and un-intrusive wrists hold empty bowls outward. These beings play into the Guatemalan aesthetic, daily fixtures in front of churches. They guard their earnings in their pockets so that the bowls are always empty. It is difficult to determine whether their tranquil stance on the sidewalks is noble or pathetic. Is it admirable to stoically accept the meager role they are handed? Passers-by reward this quiet nobility with coins or instead move past without guilt because the beggars never look toward them. Visitors from the United States and Europe take snap shots of these faces. The beggars do not flinch or call the tourists on their hypocrisy.

There is one man who acts as an exception to the clay menagerie of beggars. He lays sprawled on the pavement of the bustling open market adjacent to central park in Xela, Guatemala. Some mental illness has rendered his pain a raw, ominous presence to all who pass him. He cannot form his mouth to speak, so instead he moans violently. Cords of saliva stretch from his brackish lips to his contorted fingers. He is unable to close his hands enough to hold a bowl. Likewise, he cannot sit, but leans forward as if suspended in a fall. I spent my days wanting to offer him something, and finally brought him bananas. For half a moment his moaning ceased. His twisted fingers raked the fruit into his shoulder bag. And the entire market turned to watch us. They watched until he began to moan again and I left, embarrassed and confounded. His moan was a daily fixture which I had not lived there long enough to become accustomed to. Only his silence could serve to stir those around him.

In Central Park, in the crowded buses hurtling recklessly through their final years, the men with sealed eyes sometimes speak. With tattered bibles suspended in their leathered hands, they sing psalms and recite praises to Jesus. In each recitation, they implore fear of *el Dios*, for it is only by giving our selves up to him that our lives will improve. Adjacent to Central Park and the open market, a white church stands behind a black speared metal gate. Occasionally a husband and wife with sealed eyes lean on crutches and shake maracas in front like a wretched manger display. Others lean despondently against the bars until they sleep and awaken severely sunburned. When the gates are open, as many as twenty beggars may stretch out in its shadow on the brick patio. Their eyes are usually open here, and they sit in no particular pose with no bowls beside them. This property is the closest semblance to home for them. Here, they can be honest and feel cared for. Jesus always expects more from them and never pities them.

For my first week in Xela, Guatemala, I wandered aimlessly around the city recording anything that sounded interesting. I tried my first interview here on the church patio. The first man I approached had long spindly legs bent and sprawled in front of a boney and angular torso. The sun was partially behind the church, creating a slant of light across his sullied hair and sharp shoulders. Because his eyes seemed the most alert of the lot, I was drawn immediately to him for an interview. I was also deeply afraid of being exposed as privileged and patronizing.

I started by asking his name, which was Pedro. I told him I was looking for love stories, which was true. Unlike most other journalists passing through Guatemala, I did not want to lament the many tragedies that the country suffers. Naturally, I cared about bringing social problems to light. But due to a long, persistent history of deception and indifference from their government, what I observed my four months here before was a greater willingness among the citizens to be subject to one another. With poverty leaning drunkenly on their doorstep each morning, no one attempted to deny its existence, nor its relation to their everyday lives.

When Hurricane Stan devastated the Guatemala just days after Katrina decimated New Orleans, citizens sheltered the homeless from the rain in their own personal homes. Meanwhile, in the mountains, mudslides were instantaneously destroying entire Mayan pueblos. One pueblo near the national tourist attraction Lago Atitlan was turned into a massive grave overnight when a mudslide claimed the lives of all 1400 citizens. Volunteers and citizens of the surrounding pueblos anxiously dug to recover survivors. They found homes filled completely to the roof with mud that had burst through the

windows and buried entire families still poised in sleep in their beds. Months later when I visited the village, the school and one-room hospital were still half- swollen by stones. Villagers continued to clear the boulders from around the houses one by one with their bare hands. Though the pueblo was near a tourist attraction, it had not served as a major location for hotels and restaurants. Over two years later, the government still has only come to the aid of major locations of commerce. The rest have only been repaired, relocated, or rebuilt due to the sweat and altruism of neighbors and volunteers.

This evident attitude of work, practicality, and compassion impelled me to ask for stories about love rather than stories of injustice in order to document the social problems in Guatemala.

For his love story, Pedro preferred to tell me about the love *el Dios* has given him, or rather the love the church has promised him should he overcome his life of sin. In *el Dios*, justice flourished and his destiny was and always had been within his control. As a boy, he was given over to the care of his aunt and uncle after his mother died of a flu-like disease. During fourth grade, his uncle, who drank heavily and brought violence into the home every night, drove Pedro out of the house. His aunt was spread thin across eight children and didn't dare stand up to her husband. Besides, he added, "She always told me that I'd brought the devil into the house, and that my mother might have lived had my siblings and I acted more cleanly." When I asked Pedro if he believed this, he nodded his head insistently, "God is great. He knows, he knows when someone is not pure. I wasn't pure. I was always getting into trouble." And his father during all this time? "Alcoholic, too." He spent the next several years of his life living off of the $0.20 shoes shines in central park. He drank and sniffed glue and slept on the sidewalks.

His life hit a turning point when he was taken in by a Catholic rehabilitation shelter. In exchange for saying his daily prayers, studying the bible, and confessing his sins, he was given soup, bread, and a bed if there were room that night. They introduced him to the love of Jesus Cristo. Should Pedro learn to fear the power of Jesus, he would become purified and would longer have to wont for daily shelter and nourishment as he does today. The center gave him hope.

At this point, Pedro's chest began heaving up and down, thin tears streamed down his parched and blackened cheeks. His words came out in raspy gulps which smelled of liquor. "God forgive me, I still have so much sin in me. I know that God is great and God is forgiving, that I must give myself over to him, that he will take the Devil out of me. I fight the Devil every day because he knows me so well. God forgive me, he knows me so well." For some months Pedro had not been welcome to the rehabilitation center – the Devil in him was not leaving and was affecting the other clients.

In the absence of government aid, I understand the strength of the church, often the only arm of institutional compassion. It is hard to critique the method of the center which took Pedro in when it is in fact the only place that ever *has* taken him in.

My second home in Xela is an orphanage on the countryside next to a high security prison. The dusty trek to the home is laden with ashy fields which burn daily from the dry climate. Men lead their cattle with ropes through the bed of litter, while dogs rove in gangs across the paths. Each day that I finally reached the gate where a mural read *Casa Hogar de Ninos Jerusalem,* the sixty or so children housed there would flock to meet me and await Norah, the fourteen-year-old tenant and default caretaker of the home – only she was allowed to unlock the gate for me.

There is a woman who is given charge over the home. She is referred to as "Tia Erika" or Aunt Erika. She is an ugly woman with sharp conceited eyes. Always appearing stressed, she locks herself in her quarters or in the office and never speaks gently to the children. Should a child cry within earshot, she shouts, "Ok, now what?! Who's crying? Who's crying? Why are *you* crying?!" The child usually then points out the perpetrator of whatever harm came to him and, without questioning anyone else, she swats the accused in the back, throws him forward and screams at him to behave. When I speak with her, she feigns refinement, speaking softly and with courtesy to me through her scratched and damaged voice. She places a hand over her chest and poses herself as a tragic victim. She has almost completely handed all her work over to the mature Norah. For the last two years, my family has sent $100 to sponsor two girls there. When it appeared this year that the money had not been reaching the girls in full, she avoided meeting with me and denied me access to their financial files.

In the northeast corner of the home's front yard is the home of Padre Jacobs Manfredo. He is a local celebrity for founding this orphanage and several rehabilitation centers after overcoming his own drug habits and devoting himself to Jesus. He is rarely seen among the children, though they refer to him as "Papa" (dad). On Sundays, they load into a van and he drives separately to the church where he preaches. Secretly, these weekly excursions bore and irritate me, but the children are especially touched when I come with them. So I accompany them, and I watch Manfredo lecture them about the sin they must rid themselves of, and tia Erika kneels in front of her chair, sobbing for forgiveness from Jesus Cristo. A darling two-year-old named Fernanda is brought to the edge of the stage with a few other toddlers where Manfredo touches their heads and implores the devil to leave them. Fernanda was discovered abandoned and on the verge of fatal starvation when someone brought her to the *Hogar.* I was warned to not hug or pity her, for it was Fernanda's own susceptibility to the Devil which put her in present circumstances. She cries often and I can only comfort her in secret. When she doesn't pooh after a half hour on her potty, the hired caretaker swats Fernanda on the back. Standing below Manfredo's palm, Fernanda always looks restless, confused, and somber. She is the most angelic image throughout the entire church.

For some children, church their only chance to perform and listen to music, for the enjoyment of music and dance outside the house of God is strictly prohibited. The younger ones are herded outside and given sweets which they always insist on sharing with me. We suck on popsicles and look out over the view of corrugated tin roofs and dirt yards scattered with chickens and lines of laundry. Then we herd back into the vans for lunch.

Even though the children will complain to me in whispers about music and books and boyfriends denied them by Erika, the couple times I criticized Erika in front of them, they asked innocently and with surprise, "Do you not like the Tia?" They likewise declared their love for Papa, though only ever seemed to have stories about his overly-harsh castigation.

I am close with most of the children in the orphanage. Volunteers come through sporadically for short periods of time and rarely come back. Once I revisited the children this year, they embraced me with tears and could note every difference in my weight, my makeup, my comportment. I decided to focus my radio interviews on the orphanage so that I could continue to volunteer there, five hours each afternoon.

But the oppressive hand of the church which the children interpreted as love confounded me about which questions I should ask. I wanted to continue to focus my love toward them without exposing the illusion. The children had to embrace this manipulation, powerlessness, and insignificance full-heartedly in order to be happy. Should they choose to be dissidents, they'd soon go mad or get kicked out with no means to live on. Should they understand that is the church's denial of contraceptives which is greatly culpable for the massive orphan crisis in Guatemala, they might find themselves even more confounded about their own existence than they already grow up to be, and still have no elder to confide in.

In the meantime, morning interviews with the beggars before the church consistently yielded interviews such as that of Pedro's. I was grateful that the church took them in and nourished them, but still perceived their treatment as that of animals, humiliated and tricked out of their rights. Desperate to feel more included in the happier society about them, they buy into false promises of future peace while being riddled with blame for their lives of misery. Tossed aside by their families, by the government, by the people who pass by, and sometimes by the conditional love of the church, they gloss over the rawness of their manipulation with the myths the church feeds them. The less power they have, the more willing they are to pretend.

At night they collapse drunkenly on the sidewalk and sleep in their own blood and saliva. In the afternoon, they wake up alone, their solitude unmasked. They march madly through the streets as the school children return home, yelling indiscernibly in frustration. Their rage becomes unchecked and unmuted and they erupt, often returning home to beat their wives. They attempt to tear down their own life, the one they hate, the one they blame themselves for not being able to escape.

Though I resent the superficial and sometimes cruel shield of the church, I was afraid to remove from the eyes of any of my interviewees, as blindness was preferable to complete hopelessness in my opinion. So I never figured out the right questions to ask anyone. And I failed my first attempt at being a journalist.

So I volunteered at the Hogar each day and let the kids play with my camera and digital audio recorder. I snuck pop music in on the recorder for them and secretly taught them to dance. My favorite girl, and possible future daughter, was deaf. I suspected the money my parents sent to fund her education at a brilliant school for the deaf (which I enrolled her in two years ago) was not going where it was supposed to. So my ex-boyfriend (now fiancé) and I began to walk her to school each day and film her in the afternoons.

As a result, we spent ten hours of each day putting together a short film about the blind and deaf in Guatemala. There is no literature that I can find on the human condition of the blind and deaf anywhere in Central America, and none of my interviews came out clear. But we did get some beautiful shots.

One scene is of Don Nicolas and his wife Jesus. Nicolas lost his sight when he sustained an injury to the head and the hospital could not help him. He was twenty-four at the time. His wife lost her sight when she was five. She was crossing the street when a motorcycle hit her. She and Don Nicolas were already in love when he went blind. She taught him how to walk and sell lottery tickets and determine if someone was passing him counterfeit money. They loved each other, and this is how the survived. Nicolas

apologized if his wife wasn't very communicative. "She has suffered so much," he told me in private before I met her. She read several psalms from a brail version of the bible.

Don Jorge lives in church quarters where is he taken care of because his family does not want to help him. With only $500, the doctors might be able to restore the sight diabetes took from him, but he can't afford it. He confesses that he lost his sight because he switched from Catholicism to Christian Evangelicalism – at least that's what his Catholic church told him, so now he's Catholic again.

The rest is short clips from the city of Xela on a daily basis. In these shots, you see the beggars, the soldiers, and the school children. You watch students in a school for the deaf play soccer, and a family converse in sign language about when the father was younger and only played with other deaf children. I think it is beautiful and I plan to work more with the deaf and blind in the indigenous regions next time I return to Xela.