The Return
Returning to and from the Place of Pain

Claude Marie Barbour

The moral evil of torture can leave its victims dehumanized and broken. Five survivors of this ordeal witness to their inner journey back to the place of suffering and how their “return” has led them to a deeper commitment to faith, justice, and solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

“What does the Lord require of us?
Only this, to seek justice, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with our God” (Mic 6:8).

If you listen to people who have come to reconciliation, survivors whose humanity has been restored after human rights violations, this shift in perspective is always an important turning point. It reorients their story without diminishing the gravity of what has happened. Frequently, what is revealed . . . is that the most painful and degrading part of the burden they carry turns out to be more than pure evil or utter absence such as the women experienced at the tomb. The burden reveals a purpose that reorients perspective, a calling to move in a different direction, or a commission to undertake some task” (Schreiter, 44).

This article is dedicated to my companions, survivors of human rights abuses. All survivors have experienced the terror and trauma of moral evil. Some of us have decided to share our journeys, to return to the place of pain, and to recount how we have coped over the years, becoming persons with a capacity to accompany

Claude Marie Barbour, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is professor of World Mission at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. A former missionary in South Africa, and founder of Shalom Ministries and Community, she currently works with survivors of human rights abuses and in the Native American communities of Chicago and South Dakota.
others who are survivors. I will not in this short essay address the question of how social and moral order is restored in the midst of violence and destruction. Suffice it to say that it can best be done by people who have experienced moral evil themselves, by those who walk very closely with them, and those who are particularly sensitive to issues of justice and solidarity.

“(In) the experience of reconciliation, one can sense that one is in a new place, but realize that it is still uncharted territory. Sometimes that new territory is explored as a vocation, a calling to heal others. Sometimes it becomes the project of a lifetime” (Schreiter, 31). Nelson Mandela is one of the greatest examples of this response. He served twenty-seven years in prison, eighteen of them in solitary confinement. His life witnesses to the ability of an individual to enter a new place as a lifetime project. Mandela has committed himself to work for the freedom of the oppressed as well as the oppressors. He transformed his enemies into friends by giving a place of honor to his jailer during his inauguration. His love and forgiveness helped to begin healing in South Africa.

“Many times, the torture experience changes the survivor’s hopes for the future. Very often, survivors start looking at the world in a different manner. Many survivors have become politically involved” (Vera, 5). And later, “survivors feel the need to start resisting and changing actual structures that are corrupt and oppressive” (10). This is the process that I will try to share, as difficult as it is. Understanding the world of survivors means one must be aware that the trauma we have suffered will always be with us. With God’s grace, with the help of friends and professionals, we attempt to reconstruct our shattered lives and reach a stage where the traumatic events no longer dominate, even though the scars of suffering always remain. As survivors return to the inner place of pain in our individual processes of healing and reconciliation, three major themes are found in our stories: faith, justice, and solidarity, particularly with the oppressed, poor and marginalized.

The Survivors’ Stories

Thanda Ngcobo (South Africa):

“As I go back to visit the sources of my pain and losses, I have found strength in Jesus to be able to sit and look straight into the eyes and soul of the world’s discrimination forces and invite the inner patience as I write this. I hear the gentle song, ‘Be still and know that God is fully in charge above and beyond the obvious storm of negativity.’”

Thanda has made the long journey back; through the eyes of her heart, mind, and soul, she remembers the suffering that she, her family, friends, and her nation, suffered as a result of the apartheid system. Her faith in God and personal relationship with Christ have been the guiding forces in her healing. As an
ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and certified pastoral counselor, she has been able to use her journey through suffering, pain, healing, and reconciliation to help countless others.

**Andriana Portillo-Bartow (Guatemala):**

“When I arrived at my father’s house on September 11, 1981, I found that the Guatemalan military had detained and had ‘disappeared’ him and my two daughters, ten- and nine-years-old, together with three other relatives. My world was turned upside down forever. That day I saw soldiers, with faces painted black, washing the blood on the floors of my father’s house. Twenty of them surrounded me and pointed their machine guns at my head. I could not cry for a long time after that because horror took hold of me that day and never left. Despair, grief, and sorrow took hold of my body and heart and never left. The faces of my two ‘disappeared’ little girls and the echo of their voices remain imprinted in my mind and in my heart, even after so many years. I see their faces and hear their voices everywhere. Their pictures hang on the walls of my house, painful testaments to the fact that they indeed exist. Because they were ‘disappeared,’ their very existence is denied. They are neither alive nor dead.

“Many years have gone by since that horrible day when time seemed to stop, and time has been generous with me in the sense that I can look back into those painful days, weeks, and years without losing control of my emotions. But there are times also when a sound, a smell, a face, a voice throws me off balance and I find myself in that place of pain, deep within me, where nobody can touch me. And I remain there for a long, long time. I feel terribly alone in my despair, so alone that my family, my friends, everybody is a stranger to me. The pain and grief are so deep that I want to die and to put an end to this agony that consumes me.

“It is a grief so deep that it leaves me exhausted, tired of the power it has over me. But, from somewhere, a place I can’t name, comes a desire to reach out, and I follow it, and out there I find my surviving daughters crying out for their mother. I find my husband lost in his own grief for not being able to reach me and alleviate my sorrows. I find my friends who don’t know me anymore, and I find the wounded people who, just like me, are forced to visit their own places of pain, and have cried out without my hearing them. When I emerge from what feels

---

**Understanding the world of survivors means one must be aware that the trauma we have suffered will always be with us.**
almost like a death, the world seems softer and more alive with laughter and full of solidarity in a way that I have never experienced before. And I realize that I have really died many times, and that it has been my daughters, my husband, and my many friends who have breathed life into me as many times as I have died. They have grieved with me and stood by me as I banged my head against the wall, and pulled my hair out, and cried out for my ‘disappeared’ daughters to come back to me. It has been their simple acts of kindness that have restored over and over again my belief in the resilience of the human spirit and I am grateful to them for their patience, for their generosity, and for their love.

“That I am able to continue doing human rights work despite the grief I carry within me, I owe to my family, my friends, and to all those survivors who by example have taught me that it is possible to be broken and yet continue to face life. They have done this in such a manner that I can only think of them as being really heroic. It is so easy to let pain, despair, grief, even fear control our lives. It is so easy to put memories aside and act and live like no torture took place, to become a person who remembers nothing and feels nothing. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to go on with our lives, carrying the burden of unspeakable memories. But we are all living history and living monuments to something or someone who lives in us, and, because of that, we have the task of making sure that all that pain we have endured and carried on our shoulders, for what seems forever, never happens again.”

Adriana has transformed her many years of anguish into a life commitment to make the world a safer, more just place. A well-known activist and truth speaker, she is currently the Amnesty International coordinator for Chicago.

**Jorge Montes (El Salvador):**

“It was the month of July, 1981, during the rainy season in my country. The last night before my capture and disappearance, a heavy rain fell with winds nearly at the speed of tornadoes. This type of weather is very unusual in El Salvador. The social and political situation during this time was also very stormy. In fact, 1981 was a period of human rights abuses, political persecution, and massacres. To talk about being captured or ‘disappeared’ is to talk about near physical execution. My captors were a group of soldiers, members of the First Brigade of Artillery of El Salvador. After they detained me and three of my friends, they immediately started to accuse us of being members of the BPR, the Popular Revolutionary Block, one of the most active political and social movements of this time. The soldiers beat and kicked us, using their rifles, physical force, and obscene words against us. They hurt me in the area of the thorax and in the back. The handcuffs they used on me almost cut my hands they were so tight. Our accusers said that, because we were very young, we were part of the BPR and that we had participated in military action against National Guard members.
“After kicking us and intimidating us with words, they said if we did not accept responsibility for the accusations, they would execute us immediately. After we were detained two or three hours, they called in an armed group of civilians to take us somewhere else. They were also very violent toward us and threw us in the back of a pickup truck. It was around noon, and the back of the truck was hot like an oven. They said they had orders to kill us. It was a very scary moment and I felt it was my last minute on earth. I cannot forget this moment. They took us a long distance from where we were captured to the First Artillery Brigade headquarters, located in the Department of La Libertad, in San Juan Opico. The ‘El Playon,’ a well-known common political holocaust site and cemetery, was located just next to this military facility.

After arriving handcuffed and blindfolded, and after being kicked, they threw us in the corner of a small, nasty room that smelled as if a cadaver was in it. Flies were all over us. The interrogation process continued during the four or five days of our disappearance. I say ‘disappearance’ because nobody knew about our case; neither Amnesty International, the Human Rights Office of the assassinated Bishop Romero (known as Tutela Legal), nor my parents or friends knew where we were. As I said before, the probability of being killed was nearly 100% when captured and held under these conditions.

During the time of my captivity I could only remember the face of my mother and the courageous ministry of Bishop Romero. I asked him every day, every moment, to help me and my friends to be freed from this terrible experience. We were always blindfolded. We didn’t know if it was day or night, where we were, or why they sent us to this place. Many other terrible things might have happened to me, such as sexual abuse, molestation and the use of different kinds of torture instruments. I really can’t remember what else they did because they gave us stimulants and drugs in the food. What I can affirm is that my faith helped me to survive: my faith in justice and my faith in the liberation process of my Salvadoran people who have suffered poverty, marginalization, social and political abuses, impunity and lies these many years.”

Jorge has also returned to the place of pain and is now a student at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, preparing for ordained ministry and service to people who have suffered injustice at the hands of others.

It is so easy to put memories aside and act and live like no torture took place, to become a person who remembers nothing and feels nothing.
Matilde De la Sierra (Guatemala):

“Still I pursue a distant star, still I seek my encounter with the sun’s light that, despite the storms, enlightens every day.”

“My name is Matilde De la Sierra. I am from Guatemala, living in exile in the United States for the past eight years. I was forced to leave my country twice during the civil war because my life was threatened many times. Finally, I was tortured during a time when I was working as a medical doctor with the Mayan people of Guatemala. This is the first time in the last nine years that I’ve been asked to reflect on my experience of moving beyond my torture. During these years I have carried within me the scars of a cruel torture; and with them the memories of that violation, of that humiliation of my being. After my soul’s mourning, the days of sadness, agony and loneliness of exile became an intimate part of my life.

“Undoubtedly, since my torture, my life has been totally changed. But it was not just because of being tortured. There has also been the pain of having to leave my beloved country, my family, and my people. Leaving my country, coming to the United States, and asking for political asylum were horrible ideas I was urged to follow; but at that time I had no other choice. These nine years have been a long, difficult, and painful journey, especially because I have had to accept myself as a person different than I was before. Because of my torture, I became very, very timid, not playful, not trusting anybody and without the desire to live. I wandered without purpose or hope.

“At one point of my exile, I had the hope of going to Peru to work as a doctor. However, since I could not leave this country, I missed that opportunity. Soon after, I moved from Arizona to Chicago, where I found new life and hope. There I had the experience of living in a community of trust and love, the Catholic Worker Community called *Su Casa*, where I met new people, some of whom were in solidarity with me. Still others united with me in the struggle for justice and peace. But, most important of all, in this community I met the man who today is my spouse, the companion whom life gave me to keep fighting for the world, who supports and consoles me, gives me strength when I am weak and discouraged, and is helping me to heal. Before getting to know Jim, I was para-
lyzed by the torture. But with Jim I have learned how to express my feelings, how to play again, and to laugh. Little by little I have become more self-confident. The other person who is keeping me going is my mother, even though she is in Guatemala. Her faith, courage and strength give me fresh energy and determination every day of my life. I will always be grateful to her.

“Not all my healing comes from community and from those I love. Sometimes I need to be alone in order to express my pain, sadness, and anger through my poetry and drawing. I continue to live with intense sadness, moments of anxiety and fear when I relive that horrible torture in flashbacks. I will always live with the reality of the torture. Slowly I am learning to accept this fact. In this way I continue my life, hurting but wishing only to live as a sensitive and compassionate person. I am sick and tired of the cruelty in the world. I desire to laugh, and have everyone laugh with me, not out of obligation but because it comes from within us. I desire that the beauty of my country surround the world, that her mountains, her light, and the sweet sound of her waters smile on us, fill us with joy, and that, with the rhythm of the marimba’s song, we all say: ‘Long live peace. Long live the union of countries as brothers and sisters.’”

Matilde’s solidarity and dedication to the Mayan people of Guatemala as a medical doctor were the cause of her torture. Finding love, acceptance, and healing in the United States has served to quicken her desire for a world where all people live in peace, solidarity, and beauty. She continues to share her goodness with everyone she meets.

My story:

“Buried in stories from my childhood growing up in a French Huguenot family during World War II and the Nazi occupation are the three themes of faith, commitment to justice, and solidarity with the marginalized. Historically, in the sixteenth century, Huguenots were followers of the Reformer, John Calvin. A minority in Catholic France, they fought courageously to defend their religious and political rights. As many as seventy thousand Huguenots were killed in one night at the tragic St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572. It was the beginning of the fourth of several wars of religion in the sixteenth century, ending with the Edict of Nantes in 1598, giving religious freedom to Protestants. The history of my people through the centuries has had quite an impact on who I am today. Thinking about my ancestors who died for the cause of religious freedom has made me even more aware and determined to commit my life to work for justice, peace, healing, and reconciliation, particularly among the poor and marginalized. The descendents of these same people lived at Le Chambon, the Huguenot community that sheltered five thousand Jews, mostly children, in Nazi-occupied France (Bevans, Doidge, and Schreiter, 1). I was fortunate to be able to complete my college education in that community after the war.


**Facing moral evil**

“During World War II, our father was in the ‘underground’ and away from home for long periods of time. When my mother, my little sister, and I needed to take refuge in the underground bomb shelters, we were very afraid. One day she did something so simple and extraordinary to help us: she made two little rag-dolls, one for me and one for my sister. Every time we heard the sirens and we knew it was time to go to the shelter, she would put little medallions with our names and address around our necks and wrists. I believe this was common practice during the war as it provided some way of identifying those who were injured, dismembered, or killed during air raids. We were afraid until the day our mother explained that our dolls were afraid too and she gave us tiny medallions to tie around their necks and wrists. She would say: ‘Don’t be afraid. You have to be strong. Hold on to your little doll, have faith and know that Jesus watches over us all.’

**Commitment to justice and solidarity**

“I must have been four years old and my sister about two before the war, when our mother would take us outside to play with other children in a wooded area close to our home in Paris. There were trees there and we learned at an early age to respect nature. Some were maple trees. As they shed their winged seeds all over the ground, our mother encouraged us to collect them and plant them in little pots. In the weeks that followed we could see the tiny plants opening up and sending out their first shoots. Our mother would explain that these plants had the potential to become huge trees. We had a special name for these seedlings, we called them *petit-Nicolas* and we learned how to take care of up to twenty of them in tiny pots. In 1940, when World War II broke out, we had to live part of the time hiding in ‘underground’ shelters. Our rag-dolls always came with us and also two *petit-Nicolas*. How heartbreaking it was to leave the other eighteen. In justice, we wanted to take them all, but it was impossible and our mother would say: ‘Don’t take the most beautiful, the strongest ones; take the weakest, the smallest ones. Maybe the others will survive by themselves.’ How incredibly perceptive she was always to turn our fears and selfishness into love and compassion for others: people, rag-dolls, dogs infected with mange, even *petit-Nicolas*.

So, wherever we sought shelter, along with us came two *petit-Nicolas*.

“In those days, playing with neighboring children, we were just a happy group of kids. When my sister or I would ask ‘Who are they?’ our mother would simply reply ‘They are your little “cousins”; don’t ask questions!’ We grew up playing with all those little ‘cousins’ who were, of course, Jewish children. We were not aware of any difference. A few months later we saw that some of our little ‘cousins’ were now wearing yellow stars. We didn’t know what it meant, and I remember asking our mother if my little sister and I could also wear yellow stars. She answered in the affirmative and in the next days all of the children from that
neighborhood, about twenty-five altogether, Jews and non-Jews, wore yellow stars. Of course, our rag-dolls also wore yellow stars! Other occasional 'cousins', big and small, old and young became part of the family for awhile. We knew we were not supposed to ask questions, and we never did. Only years later, when I was old enough to understand the meaning of it all, did I realize the extraordinary courage of my parents. If the Nazis had found out, we would all have been arrested indiscriminately because of our solidarity. It was all so matter of fact. There was nothing extraordinary about us: we just lived as a Christian family where we learned the values of truth and love by example.

“I could not be more grateful to our parents and other members of the Huguenot community for helping me during my youth to develop a moral compass that pointed me in the direction of good and truth over evil. Our father in the underground, our mother's gentle response to our fear and confusion during the war, her quiet daring when she allowed us to wear yellow stars like our 'cousins', our parents' faith in God and their commitment to the weakest and most vulnerable, were living witnesses against moral evil.

_Facing moral evil—once more_

“During missionary work in Soweto, South Africa, I was confronted one more time, now as an adult, with another example of evil in a dehumanizing, corrupt, and racist political system. The system of apartheid that dominated South Africa from 1948 to 1994 shared many ideological beliefs and practices with Nazi Germany. Blacks and 'coloured' people made up the majority of the population but were denied the right to vote, had their land taken from them, and were often victims of violence, death, and 'disappearing.' In a country where mineral resources (gold, diamonds, uranium) promised prosperity and financial security, they were forced off these valuable areas of land onto rural Homelands, the Bantustans. Resistance, boycotts, and strikes by workers and students resulted in imprisonment, beatings, deportation to labor camps, and death at the hands of the white minority.

“Children orphaned or separated from their families were often abandoned in the townships. Soweto was a massive squatter township, home to an estimated two million people. Together with a Roman Catholic sister, also from France, I lived in a makeshift house and began to care for these children. As whites, under apartheid rule, we were not allowed by law to stay after dark in the township and to live among black people. This resulted in harassment and much suffering.

“How often, in our despair, we would pray, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned us?' Deep in our minds and hearts, we would hear Jesus say, 'Do not be afraid, it is I speaking to you. Watch with me, just this hour. Remember, I love you and I am with you to the end of time.' Some words of Jesus pierced my heart; others helped me to survive and fight back. Fighting back, for me, means to see
again the exquisite, delicate beauty of herons dancing on the rippled water of a
deep blue lake. Fighting back against moral evil also means to give everything
I have and am for the cause of justice, especially where human rights are at stake.

“After South Africa, I came to the United States to complete a doctorate in
theology. I was ordained to the ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
founded Shalom Ministries and Community, and have taught World Mission at
the Catholic Theological Union since 1976. In that capacity I am able to share
ecumenically with so many people, missionaries, seminarians, and members of
different churches and denominations, as we reflect on the questions of mission
in today’s world, justice, violence, moral evil, violation of human rights, and con-
version. But most importantly, I am now journeying with other survivors on the
road to recovery.

“When I return in my thoughts and prayers to the place of pain, I find it trans-
formed into a place of meaning because of the energy and commitment I have
received from others to continue my work for God’s justice and liberation for all
peoples. As Robert Schreiter says, ‘One way of existing in the new place is to
develop a mission that involves relating with the trauma in a creative way. Often
survivors help other victims become survivors. They find in the restoration of
their own humanity the vocation to help others with theirs’ (76). Sr. Dianna Ortiz,
herself a survivor, reminds us, ‘Don’t forget, even if you can’t see the light, it’s
there’ (Ortiz and Davis, x). She was supported in her own healing by Mary Fabri,
a counselor at the Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of
Torture: ‘Mary believed in fighting the evil without and within. She became my
ally’” (137).

Finally, Judith Lewis Herman states, “. . . survivors can transform the mean-
ing of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action. While there
is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making
it a gift to others. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a
survivor mission. . . . The survivor can transcend the boundaries of her particu-
lar time and place. At times the survivor may even attain a feeling of participation
in an order of creation that transcends ordinary reality” (207–08).

Conclusion

The five of us whose words are recorded here share the reality of being sur-
vivors of human rights abuses; we carry within us the scars and pains for
which there is no permanent cure. We also share a commitment to a world where
justice and peace will reign. We share a commitment to the poor and marginal-
ized and those victimized by oppressive systems. We share the struggle for heal-
ing and reconciliation, not only for ourselves but also for all those who have
suffered trauma and torture. Finally, we share the hope that God’s grace will
continue to inspire others to enter into solidarity with us as we work for a new creation.

“My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor 12:9).

References


Other Resources


