

Carlos Dimas

I grew up in El Salvador, raised by a courageous single Mom. I have two siblings plus another five on my father's side (from two other marriages). I grew up in the capital city, in an urban area, close to the soccer stadium, and had a challenging upbringing for many reasons, including an alcoholic father who also used violence to deal with stress. I remember one time he came home drunk while Mom was ironing his clothes. He demanded that she get more alcohol for him and when she refused, he knocked her down, placed the hot iron on her chest and didn't let her go to the doctor. To this day, she carries the scars and marks of the iron.

When I was 12 years old, my father and mother separated. My mom ran from him with us in tow after she tired of the abuse. Shortly after that, I got involved in the guerilla movement. I was an angry, lost, impulsive, vengeful boy. At 14 years of age my best friend, Cabezas, and I were invited by the guerrillas to one of their meetings. Young adults wanting to talk to us was compelling by itself, and they offered the opportunity to hear some lessons (courageous stories of insurrection) on uprising (what I now see as brainwashing) against what they characterized as an oppressive system bent on subjugating the lower classes. They were a group of university students one block down from our school who intellectually had bought into Marxism and were looking for kids to recruit under the guise of wanting to make a difference in the country by forceful methods. It sounded very appealing at the time.

They used stories of abuse in rural areas amongst the poor and vulnerable and the working class who didn't have a voice. They came to our schools and presented in the classroom. After their presentation, they invited anyone interested in hearing more to join their fight. And, of course, a few of us as impressionable youth had a righteous anger as we heard the accounts of abuse, death, oppression, and lack of representation under the hands of powerful landowners heavily backed up by a corrupt government and the army.

This was the start of their recruitment process. I still lived at home with Mom and kept these movements a secret from her. I attended these meetings right after school and would then make it home on time for dinner. After agreeing to join the guerillas, I was considered in the early stages of the recruitment and needed to prove myself. Cabezas and I were taught how to recruit others, how to identify targets, how to be look-outs, how to prepare smoke bombs, how to distribute subversive materials, and other tasks to test us. There were hundreds of children being recruited from middle school and high school. We were all kept in different rooms and we didn't interact with other kids much.

Cabezas and I would do everything together and even talked about raising our families and naming our kids after each other. We were very close. He lived in a humble wooden home near a river. His parents had been displaced from their home and were left to live with little. He was such a good boy. Smart, tender, caring, compassionate, driven, strong, passionate. Maybe because of his size, he was moved to advance training, which was firing weapons, carrying ammunition, marching in demonstrations, holding anti-government flags, and other key tasks for the guerillas.

During this time, there were death squads - para-military groups the army had deployed as civilians - who captured, tortured, and killed insurrectionists. These death squads were terrifying. They were sent out to target any uprisings in the city. Wherever they found a manifestation of uprising in the city, they would take pictures and canvass the area. Then, they would find out where the guerillas lived and go after them, planting all kinds of paraphernalia to justify the kidnapping, torture, assassination, and other fear tactics to try and quench the increasing uproar of the people desiring justice.

We heard stories in the neighborhood of families (parents, grandparents and children) who had been gathered by the death squads and put in the bathroom together and set on fire. We also saw bodies of young people beheaded, thrown on the side of the road. Most of them were tossed to the side displaying a sign or a warning regarding their involvement with socialism/communism. This was the army's way of justifying the killing of peasants and regular folks who maybe had made their opinion known or were raising questions of unfair treatment: they were quickly labeled terrorists and the killing was used to terrify others.

We had been operating as new recruits for about a year when Cabezas was captured by one of these death squads. He was sodomized and beheaded. He was so badly mangled that he was in a closed casket at his funeral. This experience marked my life forever. I started having nightmares of people chasing me and hurting my family. I would for years remember the angst and grief his parents went through - something I didn't want for my Mom or my siblings. It was at my friend's funeral that I experienced a wake-up moment, a change of heart and allegiance of sorts.

Thankfully, I was still in the training process – I had only done operations that involved small tasks and because I was quite a small, skinny kid back then (75 lbs. soaking wet), I had not been chosen to hold a weapon or fire it yet. There were so many young people involved at the time (I was in middle school) that I'm not sure anybody noticed when I stopped coming to their meetings anymore.

The challenge for the next couple of decades was trying to unlearn the insurrectionists' particular way of thinking and re-learn and adopt a new set of beliefs. That is where the church and a couple of mentors were key. I had a personal encounter with Jesus after being invited to Church. A week after Cabezas' funeral, I heard a message about Jesus as the greatest revolutionary that ever existed and my heart felt so drawn to his character, approach, difference making ability, power, influence, love, and kingdom values that my life took a 180 degree turn. After hearing a message of a "God who is not a man to lie nor the son of man to deceive." (Numbers 23:19), I felt intrigued by the reality of that message and broken by the implications of such love demonstrated on the cross. Soon after conversion, I got involved in the growing youth ministry through one of the church community groups and proceeded to multiply those three times over, eventually becoming a team leader and overseer for their community groups. I lived through Civil War in El Salvador, which only strengthened my resolve towards evangelism and discipleship.

I came to the U.S. after my mother remarried. She had rented a couple of rooms in our house after my father left us and one of them was to an American man who worked for

the Peace Corps. He developed a relationship with our family, and eventually fell in love with Mom. However, when the civil war broke out, all the Americans were told to leave, so he packed his bags and returned to the U.S. He never forgot us though. A few years later he was allowed to come back and he proposed marriage to my mom. Mom joined him in the U.S. first, then my sister who was underage, then myself, then my brother. To this day, they are still married, living in upstate NY and running an African import business. I started as a small business owner and, through my parents, became an associate pastor. Then, a Young Life Area Director for another 19 years and now, with my wife of 27 years, run a non-profit that serves men and women of peace in Latin America and the U.S. We have a 25-year-old daughter, a song writer and creative diva, and a son who serves in the army and is stationed at Fort Campbell in KY.