

The Long Haul

by Paul Knitter

“It’s been a long haul.” Those are the words my feelings bring to my lips as I look back over the almost twenty years since my wife Cathy Cornell and I first joined CRISPAZ. We’ve come a long way. And it’s been a good way—for us members of CRISPAZ and, I trust, for the people of El Salvador.

But when I say that, I imagine that a lot of people—friends who would be honest with me—might ask “Why?” Why have these years with CRISPAZ been good? After all, so many dreams for El Salvador have not been realized; so much pain is still with us. Yes, the war is over, but poverty due to injustice is still as murderous as ever; political corruption and intrigue abound; “the powers that be” are even more staunchly entrenched. Furthermore, the question of how to respond to the ongoing injustice and oppression appears more complex and unclear than ever. What Jon Sobrino calls “the anti-kingdom” is stronger and also more disperse and evasive. So I’ve heard the ironic, but also somewhat nostalgic, comment: “*Era mejor cuando era peor*”—“It was better when it was worse.”

So we’re still very much at this “long haul.” Why do I, or how can I, say that’s it’s been good? Can what we’ve experienced and learned so far help us figure out how to carry on? Can the “long haul” guide us on “the longer haul”? That’s what I’d like to explore in these reflections. I want to look back in order to look ahead. Did we learn anything then that can sustain us now? I think so.

It has to do with mysticism. I know that sounds a bit weird, maybe even like a cop-out. But honestly, looking back over the past 20 years, I believe our experience with CRISPAZ has been an empowering call to mysticism. Looking ahead, I believe our present state of the world is calling us to deepen and broaden that mysticism.

LOOKING BACK

What do I mean by mysticism? It’s a slippery, often sugary, word, I admit. As used among theologians and scholars of religion, it’s a blanket term that covers the many different ways people come to feel (yes, feel) that they are connected with, part of, or a vehicle for Something More. I use the expression “Something More” not as a description but as a pointer to that mysterious Reality that stirs, in different ways and forms, within the many religions of the world. This Something More is imaged as a personal Being in some traditions, while

in others it is conceived as a universal, compassionate energy, or as the dynamic interconnectedness of everything. “Mysticism,” then, is the word specialists use to indicate what can happen to people when, generally through the stories or practices of religion, they feel connected and animated by this Something More.

That’s what I think happened to many members of CRISPAZ. Our work over the years with and for the people of El Salvador has been what we can call a mystical experience. CRISPAZ has enabled us (maybe required us), whether we realized it clearly or not, to be mystics. As I look back, I believe this has happened in two different but thoroughly related ways.

A Mysticism of Resistance: What I’m trying to get at with this notion of “a mysticism of resistance” is, I suspect, something that has been as certainly present to the experience of CRISPAZ members as it has been difficult to describe. Most, maybe all, of us have become part of CRISPAZ because we had to. In a sense, we didn’t have a choice. Once we heard about the suffering of the people of El Salvador, once we learned of the causes of such suffering – especially the role of our government in it – we felt called, or obliged to respond in some way. We felt that we had to resist – that is, do something to remedy – the suffering-caused-by-injustice that was ravaging the people of El Salvador.

As a religious person and a theologian, I would call such feelings of having to respond and resist the first stirrings of mystical experience. There is Something that generates those feelings within us, Something that vibrates between us and the victims of injustice. I call it Something More because even though we feel it within the depths of our own being, it is also a power that, as it were, invades our being and puts it in motion. The Confucian philosopher Mencius, over 3000 years ago, called this Something “the Heart that cannot bear the sufferings of others.” We all have that Heart, he claimed. As a Christian, I would call it the Spirit given to all of us, living in and connecting all of us. Buddhists use similar imagery when they tell us that we all share the same Buddha-nature of Compassion. Whatever the symbolic name, the experience is pretty much the same – we feel in touch with Something that requires us to resist the injustice that causes so much suffering.

We should note that CRISPAZ members experienced such a mysticism of resistance not in the stillness of a

church or during the beauty of a liturgy or on the softness of a mediation cushion. Such mystical experience happened on crowded streets or in impoverished villages, as we witnessed the bloated bellies of children, tortured bodies left by death squads, anguished faces of refugees seeking safety in the country that helped drive them out of their own. More directly and theologically stated: the victimized people of El Salvador became for us sacraments of Something More. In and through them we felt the call of the Spirit, of the Heart that cannot bear the sufferings of others.

That this mysticism of resistance is a power both within and beyond any particular religious community is evident in the very nature of CRISPAZ. We are—or we became—an ecumenical group—a motley gathering of people bearing all kinds of Christian labels; Jews and Buddhists have also joined us, and we’ve also had people who prefer more generic religious labels, or perhaps no label at all. But what has brought us together in our different Christian or religious colorings is not the desire “to be ecumenical” but the imperative we all felt to respond to the needs of the poor and victimized and resist the oppressive forces holding them. A mysticism of resistance has been the energy that transcends all identities and that has linked our religious or even not-so-religious identities. The “Christians” in our name has always been understood, I venture to say, as “Christians with others.” We have never turned away anyone who had heard the cry of the poor and sought to respond to it nonviolently.

The political implications of what I am calling a mysticism of resistance were, during the 80s, noteworthy, even crucial. These were the years of Ronald Reagan’s “Morning in America,” when the country was swept up in a wash of regained patriotism (after Vietnam) and anti-Communism (“we’ll win the Cold War”). In the midst of this rebirthing of the American identity (some might say, empire), the unpleasant, dirty counter-insurgency wars in Central America were peripheral matters. Voices of protest were feeble, and if they gained volume, they were branded as leftist.

Such was the political context in which a mysticism of resistance gathered religious people together in movements such as CRISPAZ. The Spirit that called us to resistance—or, better, the resistance that enabled us to feel the Spirit—set us in counter-cultural opposition to our government’s policies, at home and in El Salvador. Our voices were resolute and strong, but few. As some political wags of the

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time put it, “The only left left in the United States (of the 80s) was the religious left.”

Did we make a difference? As suggested above, in view of the present “realidad” of El Salvador, many would question whether we did make a long-term difference. But in the context of the 80’s, many critical analysts of the time were grateful for the “religious left.” Without it, government policies, in Washington and in San Salvador, would have felt even more unrestrained. But whatever the final verdict on our success, CRISPAZ provided a place and a community where

we could respond to a mysticism of resistance, where we felt empowered to do something—and, together, to hope even when there was no reason to hope.

A Mysticism of Quiet: It is precisely here—in the difficulty and isolation of our resistance, in the need to hope against hope—that the mysticism of resistance that gathered us together in CRISPAZ became also what I might call a mysticism of quiet. The more we struggled, the more we banged our heads and hearts against the wall of official deceit (Reagan’s yearly report that human rights were improving in El Salvador!), the more we heard of the torture or death of Salvadoran brothers and sisters (like Herbert Anaya)—so much more did we feel the natural, spontaneous need to find time to be quiet. In different ways, individually but also communally, we needed to be silent, we needed to take “time out.” The mysticism of action, especially action in the midst of structural, violent injustice, called for the mysticism of contemplation or meditation.

Why? Precisely to make further contact with that Something More, that Spirit or Heart, that called us to resistance in the first place. Somehow, we needed to more directly—no, not more directly; rather, more consciously—recognize and sit with the Spirit which, having called us, had to also sustain us. In working for justice, in following the option for the marginalized, we are about a task that is, as the cliché has it, “bigger than all of us.” In silence, in prayer, in taking time out, we could feel that larger picture with its greater Power.

And so, over the years, the CRISPAZ family—volunteers, staff, board members—has felt the



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need and made the space to have liturgies or rituals together. We've offered our volunteers opportunities for spiritual direction and retreats. I distinctly remember one board meeting in El Salvador where every evening or late afternoon we took time out from the tangle of planning and assessing to sit together in the chapel and share with each other what are the spiritual energies that keep us going. How rich and energizing those moments were. Our resistance, our continuing to hope, was being nurtured by the Spirit that moves powerfully but silently within us and between us.

Though this mysticism of silence, or this underlying spirituality, within CRISPAZ took different forms, there was a common chord to all the differences: the example—really, the continued presence—of Archbishop Romero. His own story of resistance, and of the deep faith that animated and steeled that resistance, was a Presence in our silence. How often we reflected on his words and used his prayers. He exemplified and accompanied us in our moments of the mysticism of quiet.

LOOKING AHEAD

So what might these experiences of the past tell us about how to deal with the complexities and sufferings of our present, new millennial world? There are some evident similarities and implications. In a sense, El Salvador of the 80s was a microcosm of our present global macrocosm. The same political and military powers, serving the same economic interests, that struggled for, and took control of, El Salvador in the 80s have taken on the mantle of globalization and are struggling for the control of the post-Soviet “new world order.” And the Empire that was seeded in Reagan’s image of America as the “city on the mountain” has grown to adulthood in Bush’s “National Security Strategy,” especially as applied in Iraq. Even more than during the Reagan years, many of us feel that we are living in a world of militarism, individualism, and dominance of the mighty over the weak—a world and a nation that looks to us to be utterly estranged from Jesus’ vision of the Reign of God and from the principles of America’s founders. We are strangers—aliens—in our own land.

And precisely because of this world/nation gone awry, precisely because the situation in El Salvador and in the global system is worse now than when we thought things were so bad—we have to continue to recognize and live the same mysticism of resistance that nurtured us then. Because the anti-kingdom is stronger than ever, the Spirit or the Heart calls us to resist more resolutely than ever. There is a paradoxical mystery at work here. The more forceful the

powers of greed and injustice become, so much more powerful does the energy of resistance, in the breath of the Spirit, assert itself. It’s what St. Paul was trying to describe in Christian terms: “Where sin did abound, grace did more abound.” (Rom. 5:20)

Also, what was true of the United States in the 80s can—no, must—also be true of this first decade of the new millennium. Given the way the forces of globalization have swept over the world, given the way even resistant governments of developing countries have had to recognize the global market as “the only game in town” and the United States as the only imperial power, given the way the West’s understanding of the human being as *homo oeconomicus* (inherently self-centered and competitive) has come to dominate in all cultures—in view of such “powers and principalities” we might now say globally what we said of the U.S. in the 80’s: the only left left is the religious left.

“Only” is too strong a word. There are other forces of resistance against the empire of the market. But it can be said that religion can provide one of the most powerful and widely available resources to counter the individualism that rules the world. All religions, in different way, define the true nature, or the ideal nature, of the human being as essentially *other-oriented* rather than *self-oriented*. According to the original teachings of all the religions, we find our true happiness in love of and compassion for *the other*—the Transcendent Other and/or the neighborly other. In the spirit of their founders and according to their authentic teachings, the religions of the world are sources of resistance to the individualism and greed of empire and free markets.

We felt this during those early years of CRISPAZ. But today, what happened *ecumenically* in CRISPAZ needs to happen *inter-religiously* throughout the world. Not just Christians but religions must come together. This is happening. Just as the mysticism of resistance gathered us together as differing Christians, all called to respond to the cry of the oppressed, so this same mysticism is summoning persons from differing religious families to *come together* so as to *act together* in opposing the human and environmental suffering that pervades our world. But this has only begun—in global meetings such as the Parliament of Religions as well as in grassroots situations throughout the world where Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus find

**In order to make peace,
we must be peace.**



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themselves living in one neighborhood and so responsible for this one neighborhood. Just as during the 80s we found hope in the ecumenical religious resistance of CRISPAZ, so today we can find hope in fostering, in our neighborhoods and internationally, an *interreligious dialogue of resistance*.

We can also draw hope for today from the way the mysticism of resistance continues to call for a *mysticism of quiet*. If, as we have sadly noted, the powers and principalities are stronger and more pervasive than ever, we will need to nurture and draw deeply on our inner, spiritual resources. Otherwise, we will not be able to hang in there for this longer haul; otherwise, we will not be able to continue to hope against hope. We need to nurture ourselves spiritually.

But today, the spiritual nurturing is taking place, for many people, *interreligiously*, through interreligious dialogue and not just from one religion. This too, I believe, is a source of hope and strength. Let me comment briefly on some insights or clarifications that CRISPAZ, and many Christian activists, are learning as they explore an interreligious mysticism of quiet and spirituality.

Perhaps the most important lesson, which we have always known but which has become clearer and more inviting through the example of our Buddhist brothers and sisters, is that *in order to make Peace, we must be Peace*. In CRISPAZ we've always been pretty clear on what we have to do to make Peace ("If you want Peace, work for Justice!") but now we need to explore more deeply what it means *to be Peace*. Being Peace has to do with feeling and knowing we are part of a larger process that makes our work both important and insignificant; such "enlightenment" subordinates and relativizes our egos and plans in this larger process—a process that is open-ended and can never be captured by one political system or one religious vision. To be Peace consists of a sense of connectedness, relatedness, compassion for all, even for those who represent the "powers and principalities," the oppressors.

Here we touch on one of the most important lessons we have been learning in recent years as we try to deepen our mysticism of silence, especially through interreligious sharing: the Spirit that calls us through the victims of oppression also touches us in the actions and persons of the oppressors. This means that if we must resist and denounce oppression, we must do it in a way in which we do not lose a relationship with, and compassion for, the oppressors. Resistance to oppression must somehow include embrace of the oppressors. Yes, if we want peace, we must work for justice. But if we want justice, we must work for reconciliation. More than ever, for members of CRISPAZ and for all peace activists, the imperative and the challenge of non-violence presses upon us—and offers us hope.

So to conclude, the cry of the poor and the strength of their oppressors remain, and perhaps have grown stronger. But such anguished voices and such systemic power are also the sacraments, as it were, of a mysticism of resistance nurtured by a mysticism of quiet. The Spirit or the Heart that summons us to resist, but always from an inner source of strength and compassion, is also connecting us across our cultural and religious differences. We can feel ourselves part of a growing multicultural, multireligious community of resistance and of compassion. Herein is new hope for an old struggle.✚

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