

## Crusade to Save the Suffering

Beatrix Gonzales  
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*Beatrix Gonzales (right) with two sisters in her retreat center*

"But even this escape is not open to us. Once we have taken up the word, it is thereafter impossible to turn away; a writer is no detached judge of his countrymen and contemporaries; he is an accomplice to all the evil committed in his country or by his people. And if the tanks of his fatherland have bloodied the pavement of a foreign capital, then rust-colored stains have forever bespattered the writer's face."

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

I strongly feel that when a person speaks from the heart, what he expresses is very personal and fragile. In our society, most of us do not value the heart because ours is a technological society of material things and of competition, so the mind is of prime importance. Thus, there is little value in the heart, except for a laugh sometimes. When one speaks or writes it is because one has a desire to express oneself or one feels that one has something significant to say. More and more I find it very difficult to say or write very much.

No matter where I go, I cannot separate myself from the cotton fields and meal-less days of my past (only because I know that they are today still a reality), the eighteen-year-old Black and Chicano high school dropouts in the amputee wards of the V.A. hospital, the runaways in the hostels of Houston, the lonely winos of Madison Avenue, the mistreated seniles in the nursing home of San Juan, the stinking bars, guns, rats, dirty streets, and the hunger, desperation, sickness, hatred, and confusion of West Side Chicago.

Here at the University of Texas there are many books, and here many famous and not so famous men write about social injustices and suffering. Some write about freedom. Here students and professors rap about these things.

Here everybody is going to change the world when they graduate. Here we are reminded of France in the mid-eighteenth century before she engaged herself in the Seven-Years War and faced her downfall. Francis Parkman writes in *Montcalm and Wolfe* (p. 35): "The prestige of the monarchy was declining with the ideas that had given it life and strength. A growing disrespect for king, ministry, and clergy was beginning to prepare the catastrophe that was still some forty years in the future. While the valley and low places of the kingdom were dark with misery and squalor, its heights were bright with a gay society -- elegant, fastidious, witty -- craving the pleasures of the mind as well as the senses, criticizing everything, analyzing everything, believing nothing."

Our hearts we have compromised for the "in" things of today -- talk, titles, and rags. Everything is cheap. Our homes and cars are made to leak after three years -- and so is our government. These are all mere physical manifestations of our "inner essence" -- a lack of quality, depth, value. We have separated our physical bodies and minds from our spiritual desires and needs, namely our hearts. We accept responsibility for our racial, economic, or political problems, only verbally. Our universities, churches, families, and peer circles have sanctioned our manner of coping with the farmworkers' struggle -- as detached observers and sympathizers.

### **Desire for spiritual fulfillment**

God's love and concern for man can find expression only through man's heart and responsive action. But we have separated ourselves from our hearts in order to "get by." We have limited God's expression here on earth or left Him out completely. Yet in our emptiness, we see today man's deep desire for spiritual fulfillment -- for peace, identity, community, purpose, comfort. Young and old, Christian or non-Christian, black, white, or brown experiment with medication, sensitivity sessions, drugs, and yoga.

Is this an escape, or is it an expression of man's suppressed inner need and desire to reintegrate his mind and body harmoniously in thought and action?

Upon my return from Chicago in December, 1972, (which marked the end of my six and one-half year "crusade" for the "salvation" of the suffering), I faced a realization which had been creeping up on me for some time now. I could do little for these folk through the tools, know-how, tactics or resources which I had or that were available to me. I was merely copying America's technique of dealing with her complex problems -- the Band-Aid treatment.

Would I work with the youth in Joliet for \$12,500 a year? No! Would I work with Sesame Street in Chicago for another \$12,000 a year? No! Surely I would work for the Catholic Conference of Bishops -- on legislation... where it's all? No! Everyone thought I was a fool. I was perhaps. As social servant, follower, leader, or organizer in social action, I became more and more aware of just how little we who were involved in this type of community work were doing with the resources and knowledge at hand. Our desire to effect change was sincere. But the tactics we used and the moves we made (even though we could always justify them) I deeply questioned many times. There was a growing hostility and conflict in the community, and our group or organization. Lack of unity and organization was resulting in an overlap of services, a misuse of funds, manpower, and energy. There were many reasons for this frustration and fighting.

### **Disillusion with service agencies**

Large sums of federal aid had been poured into the communities in a clumsy effort by the government to deal with the racial and poverty problem. But the solution lay in changing discriminatory policies, standards, rules, and regulations. And these only became more subtle and unreachable while the community agencies fought each other. Agencies offering similar services were granted differing amounts of money causing discontent and rivalry among the different agencies, and also, an overlap of services. This was no accident either.

Chicanos and Blacks out to look for themselves (even those who had appeared most concerned for the people) filled the ranks for the administration of the funds. Here they found security, power, prestige, and money. The "masses" whose hopes had been raised by the increasing "concern" of their leaders who spoke about brotherhood, identity, pride, and no more rats, foresaw brighter days. But they soon became disillusioned and even more bitter, and their hopes dwindled as they witnessed the heated arguments and flashy cars of their community agency neighbors. The more militant groups of the community and the gangs who had reason to be bitter also, added to the fire. Thus there was plenty of excitement, and the rats increased, and the tenements got shabbier, and the slum landlords and politicians got more comfortable.

The situation was no different on the political or education level, as brown and black faces began to fill the city councils and school boards and administrative staffs of other institutions. Many times I felt that I was merely helping to perpetuate distorted values. Those of us who could survive through the internal conflict and still had enough motivation to deal with the Chicago Park District or the Sanitation Department, entered into a maze of policies, systems, and restrictions which only became more complex as we dug deeper to find the enemy and the solution. Most of the personnel of these city departments didn't know much about their job. It all seemed so hopeless, and our work so useless!

I became conscious of how as victim or mender, I had been dealing with symptoms of problems whose origin or cause was beyond my present understanding and articulation. I saw the limit in the "salvation" I had been trying so hard to bring about.:-.lo one could now convince me that this was where it was at. Perhaps for others it was. It had been enough for me at one time. Now I wanted to understand when, where, how, and why these systems distorted the values which perpetuated them and the sad people who lived off of them. I saw no purpose in fighting in this pit forever. I knew there had to be answers to this-- and more to life. My strong desire and need was to find it.

### **And then a retreat**

In January I decided to involve myself in a retreat. Not one in which I would seclude myself in meditation, but one in which I would continue to attend classes, work, interact with people, fast, pray, and for my personal growth give up whatever I felt was necessary as I went along. I began my retreat out of pain, desperation, and confusion.

I needed to come to a deeper understanding of myself (I was caught in too much inner conflict), of other people, and the whole universe and my place within it. I sought new tools and a new framework from which to view myself in relationship to man and God, from which to view the significance of my existence. I wanted to know the relevance of man's existence in this time and age in relationship to his past, the crisis of today, and his hope for the future. Why did everyone always want to do good, yet muffle things up so drastically?

I was told these were deep theological questions and they were not practical to the political, economic, and social problems of today, and that I should quit philosophizing and go back to picketing. But if what I was presently experiencing, in view of my past, was all that there was to life, then I didn't want to live anymore. I saw no relevance in man's existence and suffering, and I could not pretend that this suffering wasn't there, nor could I pretend that this was doing anything to get to the cause of the real problem b) picketing.

Getting back to my retreat, I decided that if I could not achieve a certain degree of peace and understanding amidst my everyday life experiences, then whatever understanding and direction I sought and found in seclusion would no doubt go out the window the minute I returned to my daily life routine.

My quest turned out to be more difficult and serious than I had expected. My friends became disappointed and they called me up and accused me of abandoning them and "my people." Most of them avoided me altogether except when they wanted to question me as to whether I had really loved them at all, or whether my past involvement with the people had not been for my own selfish gain. I felt they had a right to question this because I questioned all of this myself. However, I had nothing to say. They said I was navel-watching. But what could I say? There was no other path I could take. They don't call me up anymore. Few people understand. Sometimes it is wise not to depend too much on people for understanding.

I feel that one must seek one's own path and accept that it will be different from that of other people close to us. Perhaps it will demand more, perhaps less. These demands will determine the extent of our responsibility despite our friends, relatives, community, or people. Sometimes we have to forget that they exist or that they laugh at what we do. No one can rightfully dictate or criticize another person's degree of commitment no matter how great or small, because no one but that person is fully aware of his insight, knowledge, and consequently degree of pain and unrest for man's suffering. It is this personal awareness and one's capability (physical and mental) of dealing with it, that determines the extent of one's responsibility, and the basis on which one will be judged for this life.

I am learning much from my retreat. With each small new revelation or answer to my questions, I have only deeper ones, and many times, I experience only more intense pain. But I am trying to put into action my insight-which simply means disciplining myself to accomplish more with my time, putting myself in positions which perhaps may not be very favorable -- especially to the ego -- but which will help me become more sensitive to other people's needs; serving people that I would never, in my everyday life, have to even talk to in order to get by; and questioning everything and everybody.

We've always made up and believed strange but convincing justifications for our actions. My questions about suffering and injustice lead to deep moral and spiritual implications. That may sound general, but let me explain. Everyone is so anxious to do good and to be recognized for it that we seem to be spinning our wheels on shore-range goals. Everything is so much on the surface. People, policies, and systems appear honorable and real and everyone is happy, but underneath there's an intricate web that we have woven that someday someone's going to have to tap, and everything we have constructed on its surface will collapse. What are we leaving behind for our children?

### **The morality of the church**

I question the morality of those dedicated organizers based in a Puerto Rican and Black neighborhood receiving funds from Catholic charities, and the federal government in the name of these minorities. Yet the work is staffed with white organizers who work for the neighboring white community (whose main concern and energy goes to keeping these minorities from moving into their neighborhoods).

I know this may sound trivial to us here at the University of Texas, but to the Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and poor whites of that neighborhood it's a matter of survival. In how many other places is this repeated and unquestioned? The situation of the Khmer Republic in Southeast Asia, where the U.S. has abandoned a peace-loving people to the invasion of an alien power, is not that much different.

Today, everything we have pretended to have such a strong foot on is slipping out from under us -- as we witness Watergate, Agnew's resignation, and soon it will be the Church, and Daley, and the community organization in Chicago. The men who tried to warn us of this, and tried to reawaken us were shot or imprisoned this last decade -- King, Robert F. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Camilo Torres.

Today we have a few -- Cesar Chavez, the Berrigans, Solzhenitsyn. The prophets of our day. Historically, God has been working through specific individuals to deliver to man His heart, His desire, and His purpose for man. These men have brought direction, but we have not listened.

The demands God is placing upon our lives today He bases on the time in history He has placed us and the tools and knowledge He has given us for recognizing and fulfilling our responsibility. If we feel unrest of the soul it is perhaps because He is calling us to serve as His instruments and this demand conflicts with the patterns (social, political, economic, religious) that we presently have to work within.

My question then is: Do we ignore our hearts (thus Him), and continue to live in this messy and meaningless world, or do we change the patterns? Our mistake seems to lie in that we try to construct our dream on these cracked foundations without changing the patterns, because this would demand that we change ourselves to an extent, and those things we take pride in. We are also quite good at justifying why we don't have to change ourselves and our ways in order to fulfill our purpose.

We will live in a dream-our children in a nightmare. We have been sowing bad seeds as a people and a nation. No one can prevent what these seeds will reap. We question why God allows so much suffering, but is it a fault of God, or a void in man?

These men -- King, John F. Kennedy, Torres, Gandhi -- what were they saying? Why were they shot? Malcolm X attributed the death of John F. Kennedy to the bad seeds the American people had sown for their injustices. The great men of our past have never been recognized until after their (tragic) death. Then everyone has grieved them, sighed, and said, "These men came before their time."

Could God have prepared Israel and the Jewish nation for so long to receive His son, and then sent him prematurely? What happened to the prophets He sent to prepare the people? Could we have failed to listen to the urgency of the message of these men this last decade? If so, what will our children inherit from us if Christ were to return today and our nation would shoot him too? Could six million Jews have died at the hand of the Nazis in retribution for their ancestors' failure to recognize the son of God? How can we recognize the son of God if he returns today, if we don't know his Father's heart?

These men have known their time. We do not know ours. The American Indians have had many visions. Presently, they prophesy great destruction in America -- not forty years from now, but today. We deny their prophecies. "They have no proof!" we say as we echo the same fears of our president.

Our negligence and failure to act keeps us locked within our minds- separated from the hearts and humility of these men, and limited within the world of horrors which we have conditioned ourselves to accept and that these men have so profoundly questioned and challenged amidst laughs, threats, and in the end, death. I feel that we must confront ourselves and our words very seriously.

When we begin to earnestly respond to the demands of our hearts, then we can begin to restore our relationship with God. Until then, we cannot hope for world peace and unity.