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The Models We Need

Forty years ago this week, four U.S. women were killed in El Salvador. It's taken this long to understand the meaning of their deaths — and their lives

December 3, 2020



Eileen Markey

This week in the mountains of El Salvador people who survived that nation's civil war and its violent aftermath walked solemnly into the plaza of the town of San Antonio Los Ranchos, carrying aloft portraits of four Catholic missionaries who were killed 40 years ago. The women are remembered in El Salvador as something very close to saints. They are worth remembering in this country too — saint or secular — because their lives offer models we urgently need.

On December 2, 1980, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan were stopped at a checkpoint the Salvadoran military set just for them. The next morning their discarded bodies were found by the side of the road. They'd been shot in the head; at least two appeared to have been raped. This is how Salvadorans were regularly murdered. A local military commander in the place where they were dumped — the town name means “the place of silence” — ordered them buried. It was a literal coverup. It would be another day before word spread and the women's friends learned where they were. Their bodies would be exhumed from the hasty grave.

The sight of broken bodies along the side of the road was anything but unusual in 1980s El Salvador, another front in a Cold War that was hot as hell for the indigenous and brown and black people killed in it. For ten years a movement had been growing, fueled by hope for a future not defined by incessant poverty and exploitation. The hope itself was threatening. In the fall of 1980, the Salvadoran government was in the midst of an escalating terror campaign against it. There was an armed Marxist insurgency, the FMLN, but most of the people the military targeted throughout the war were civilians: union activists, farm laborers agitating for better conditions, students arguing for clean elections, Sunday school instructors who spoke of Jesus's allegiance with poor people, the archbishop while he celebrated Mass.

What was unusual about these four bodies in the dirt is that they belonged not to the Salvadoran opposition — that is to say, poor brown people — but to white women. Three of them were Catholic nuns. As a result, the killings elicited shock and outrage in the U.S., inspired several movies and an opera by Liz Swados, prompted years of Senate investigations and Congressional fact-finding missions, and pulled thousands of Americans into caring about what Faustian horrors their country was engaged in.

The U.S. was closely involved in Salvador's counter-insurgency efforts, sending advisors to share the lessons learned from earlier Cold War theaters, Laos and Cambodia, Argentina and Chile. The Salvadoran lieutenant colonel who directed this particular killing had spent September at a U.S. training facility in Panama. The men who were Minister of Defense and the head of the National Guard at the time of the killings enjoyed a posh retirement in south Florida, until human rights lawyers caught up with them in the past five years.

But even as the women were commemorated, they were silenced. While their death was held as an outrage, the work of their lives was usually dispensed with in a vague sentence about “working with the poor.” The message of the women’s lives was too foreign to be legible to our well-grooved narratives of savior and victim. Maura, Ita, Dorothy, and Jean weren’t hapless do-gooders. They saw themselves as part of a movement for liberation, led by those who were subject to injustice. Participation meant careful and complex grappling with what role to take, how to be of use. The women were traitors — to their privilege, to the innocence with which white Americans wrap themselves, to the orderly operation of an unjust system. Maura Clarke and Ita Ford in particular did risky work: documenting the details of massacres and delivering them to the legal aid office of the archdiocese, which was collecting evidence against the regime, sheltering and transporting people the government wanted to kill, delivering banned medical supplies to encampments of people on the run. They weren’t neutral.

They are worth remembering now because white people need role models for how to be allies, how to relinquish the authority we are taught our skin bestows on us. White people with good intentions are tying themselves up in knots this year, struggling with how not get in the way of racial and anti-colonial justice, learning how to be supportive. These four women knew the score. Long before that dark checkpoint in December 1980, they'd abandoned the cozy, blinkered innocence of being white Americans. And they kept stepping, one foot at a time, into deeper and deeper commitment to people ostensibly not like them. They changed sides.

For too long white people's justice models have either been white saviors and stand-alone crusaders, or we've drawn inspiration from people of color whose encounters with injustice were starkly different than our own. Maura, Ita, Dorothy, and Jean faced the painful reality that the story they'd been told about how the world was arranged was a lie. They shifted their loyalty. They trusted that the poor, landless people they worked with, the descendants of Central American indigenous who'd raised resistance to conquistadors, understood the architecture of oppression better than they did. And could dream more vibrantly about how it might be transfigured.

Maura, Ita, Dorothy, and Jean didn't lead or attempt to fix everything: they found ways to be useful. The women acted out of deep conviction, a sober commitment to where they saw God: not in the safety of charity, but in the risk, horror — and maybe deliverance — of solidarity. They didn't find their choices simple, or comfortable. Throughout the fall of 1980 they received a series of escalating warnings and death threats. Still, they groped forward in concrete acts. They prayed for God to give them love “strong as death.”

By 2020, after George Floyd and asylum camps at the Texas border, after tear-gassed protestors and COVID-19's unequal death toll, the scales have belatedly fallen from the eyes of many Americans — white ones in particular. We might finally be able to hear what these dead women were saying. The importance of this much remembered story isn't that four white ladies got killed. It's that they crossed over, threw in with people struggling for real change. And were willing to face the consequences.

Those people singing as they carried icons into their church this week called the four women sisters. “Their blood is mixed with the blood of the Salvadoran people,” they say. “They became Salvadoran.” Maybe, with their intercession or their example, we can choose new allegiances.

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