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The Blessing Is Next To The Wound

A Conversation With Hector Aristizábal About Torture And Transformation

DIANE LEFER

Hector Aristizábal was born in Medellín, Colombia, a city plagued by violence from the drug trade and from the country's decades-long civil war. His poverty-stricken neighborhood was a prime recruiting ground for what he calls the nation's "four armies": the Colombian military, the guerrillas, the right-wing paramilitaries, and the cocaine mafia. He recalls, "I buried most of the kids with whom I played soccer." He assumed his own life would be short, too, but then he escaped into books and theater and "won the lottery": a scholarship to Antioquia University in Medellín.

In 1982 Aristizábal was working as an actor-director and studying for his master's degree in psychology when the family home was raided by soldiers. Under the Estatuto de Seguridad — Colombia's version of the PATRIOT Act — citizens were encouraged to report any suspected subversive or terrorist activity by their neighbors. A priest had turned in Aristizábal's younger brother after having overheard the boy talk politics. When soldiers found "subversive" literature in the home, both Aristizábal and his brother were taken into custody.

Aristizábal's brother was sent to prison, but Aristizábal was eventually released after having been subjected to a mock execution; beatings; electric shock to the genitals; "el potro" (being hogtied, hung from a pole, and stretched); and "water boarding" (being held underwater again and again to the verge of drowning).

He remained in Colombia for another seven years and continued to work as a human-rights activist, psychologist, and actor. Many of his friends were killed, and his own life was repeatedly threatened until, in 1989, he escaped into exile in the U.S. He married an American and settled in Pasadena, California, where he earned his second master's degree, in marriage-and-family therapy, from Pacific Oaks College. As a therapist he works with torture survivors, gang members, prisoners, AIDS patients, and low-income immigrant families. He is also a cofounder of the Colombia Peace Project, the Colombian Children's Peace Fund, and the Los Angeles Center for Theater of the Oppressed.

Developed by Brazilian artist and activist Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed (TO) uses the techniques of theater to encourage creative thinking and action addressing economic and social problems. Boal worked with Brazil's poor until 1971,

when he was arrested by his country's military dictatorship, tortured, and "encouraged" to go into exile. During his exile in Europe, Boal met people who struggled with internalized oppression, rather than direct repression by a military government, and he adapted his ideas to address their different needs.

It was through our mutual interest in Theater of the Oppressed that I first met Aristizábal a few years ago. There is much I've wanted to learn from him since then, but he is always in motion. Interviewing him meant chasing him around Los Angeles County and claiming whatever minutes I could. Our first meeting was at the Program for Torture Victims (PTV), where he is a board member and offers his own brand of nontraditional therapy. We continued during his lunch break in the spacious room at Cityscape, the arts-based therapy program he helped to start and for which he serves as clinical director. The walls there are covered with poems and drawings done by children and adolescents diagnosed with severe emotional disorders, many of whom were previously considered unreachable.

Our last interview took place on April 6 at his home. We were interrupted twice: once when he went to pick up his ten-year-old son from an after-school program, and again when a visitor arrived to tell of a shootout a few blocks away between gang members and police; he asked Aristizábal to talk to both sides in hopes of averting retaliation. At that point I figured he had better things to do than answer my questions.

Lefer: You often quote the African saying "The blessing is next to the wound." What blessing can you possibly find in torture?

Aristizábal: That's up to the person. Each of us who survives must create meaning from the experience: Why did this happen to me? Why did I survive when other people didn't? We seek meaning by creating narratives about our lives. The dominant narrative for torture is about "victims." But I don't believe in victimhood. People have tried to place me in the category of victim, and I won't allow it. Those of us who've been tortured need to see it as simply one more event in our lives, not a defining characteristic of who we are. And any time you go through a difficult ordeal, it can awaken inner resources. Instead of being a victim, each person can learn the lesson his or her spirit needs to learn. This is very hard to do, though, es-

pecially immediately after the traumatic event. First you need medical doctors who will treat you physically and psychologists who will help you find emotional release — the range of services provided here at PTV.

Lefer: After the military let you go, did you have any sort of therapy?

Aristizábal: No, no one thought to give me any, but I had people who listened to me, and friends who hid me, because we were afraid the army had let me go only in order to kill me; and I had people who protected me from myself, because I was capable then of doing something stupid. So I did have support.

Since then I have tried to recast the experience of being tortured as an initiation experience. In a traditional society, initiation marks the end of your old life and the beginning of something new. And when the initiation ordeal is over, if you survive, you are welcomed back into the community. Perhaps you come back with a gift of knowledge to share.

People undergo many ordeals — not only torture, but accidents, illness, depression, divorce, imprisonment, even adolescence. But in this country we don't have ceremonies to reintegrate people back into society. For someone who has been tortured, this is very important, because you have been isolated, alone in that room with your torturer. PTV executive director Michael Nutkiewicz has written that torture undermines your belief in relationships and leaves you stranded in an inner wilderness. Maher Arar, the entirely innocent Canadian citizen whom the U.S. sent to Syria to be tortured, was quoted in the *New Yorker*: he said the pain was so great, it makes you forget the taste of your mother's milk. You lose your community, your language, your relations. All these connections are broken. So we who have been tortured have to reconnect to the world outside. If we don't, we replicate the isolation of the torture chamber over and over. We have to find the door and the key to unlock it. That's how we heal. For me the most effective way to do this was to join with others to work for justice.

When I see the photographs from Abu Ghraib, or I read in the newspaper about this horrendous practice of "rendition," in which the U.S. sends people to other countries to be tortured, I feel great anger. Right now, as we speak, the UN Commission on Human Rights is working to close legal loopholes in the Convention against Torture, but the U.S. delegation is busy in Geneva trying to keep those loopholes open. The Bush administration is shameless about this. But such news only reignites my passion to continue my work, to create awareness, and to unmask the rationales of those who would justify torture in any way.

Lefer: The U.S. has used many tools of repression against citizens of other countries. Do you see our government ever turning these tools against its own citizens?

Aristizábal: It would be very presumptuous of me to predict. I can say that, where I'm from, you grow up knowing that



HECTOR ARISTIZÁBAL

members of your military are being trained in the techniques of torture at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. In 2000 Congress came close to dismantling the school, so the Department of Defense came up with the ploy of changing its name. Now it's the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, but it continues training soldiers in so-called counterinsurgency. Colombia sends thousands of military officers there, and the Colombian police and military also train at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. We Colombians know all about this, but most Americans don't, so the things your government is capable of doing may come as a surprise to you.

Lefer: Can we return for a moment to the notion of the blessing being next to the wound? I understand you're saying that your

experience of being tortured led you to commit yourself to this campaign to stop torture and help other survivors. But you were working for human rights and social justice before you were ever arrested. So I don't see your work as entirely a result of your experience.

Aristizábal: Maybe it gave me a new focus, or a greater intensity of desire. For a long time, during the dirty war in Colombia, when my friends were being shot dead all around me, my goal was just to survive. But after I was tortured, my goal changed. It was not just to survive, but to live a meaningful life. Sometimes, in the ordeal, we find the seeds of our identity.

There's a poem by Miguel de Unamuno, translated by Robert Bly: "Throw yourself like seed . . . From your work you will be able one day to gather yourself." We can do that by recognizing our unique gift, and sometimes the gift is found through the wound. My youngest brother, Hernan Dario, was gay and grew up in a society that despised him for his sexuality. The love that was denied him caused him great pain, and he became a crack addict. But he also had a great love of gardening, of plants. He didn't have any formal training as a botanist, but he had this natural ability. When a mafioso hired him as a landscape designer, my brother stopped using drugs and prostituting himself. He changed his life because he had the chance to use his gift.

Lefer: A little ironic that he was saved by the Colombian mafia.

Aristizábal: Not by the mafia: by his gift. Later this same mafioso paved over the gardens to make more room for his cars, and he cut down portions of the rain forest. He was a violent, ignorant man who ultimately destroyed what my brother cherished.

My brother later died of AIDS, but before his death he had the chance to realize his gift, and we all had the chance to recognize it. He was finally *seen*, and that is the real meaning of *respect*. It comes from the Latin *respicere*: "to look at again, to look back at." Respect is the act of looking back at someone,

of seeing him or her.

Lefer: It still seems ironic to me that a mafioso had such a positive influence on your brother's life.

Aristizábal: The Colombian mafia came to influence almost every part of our lives: our politics, our economy, even our psyches. The Medellín cartel even offered to pay off Colombia's external debt. That would have been great, a way to show the United States that we, too, have thieves who have made it. But of course our hypocritical political leaders wouldn't allow it: they'll take mafia money to run their political campaigns, but they say no to such an incredible possibility.

Instead the Colombian government obeys the International Monetary Fund. The IMF says, "Privatize!" and our government sells off our natural resources, putting them in the hands of transnational criminals. For example, the La Loma coal mines are now owned by the Drummond Company, based in Alabama, and this company is being sued in U.S. District Court for conspiracy in abduction, torture, and murder. It's charged with having hired the paramilitaries who killed three union leaders in 2001. The working conditions in those mines would not be allowed in the U.S. The Drummond Company increased the weight allowance on the front-end loaders from twenty-two tons to thirty-two tons. These buckets, if you look at the manufacturer's specs, are not built to accommodate that weight, so the whole machine shakes and vibrates. It does damage to the disks in the workers' backs, and some of them are crippled. It vibrates their skulls until they get symptoms of Parkinson's. I don't know if this is better or worse than the mafia.

Lefer: The cocaine cartels are also the rationale for U.S. military aid.

Aristizábal: Plan Colombia was formulated to stop drug trafficking and eradicate the coca crops, but it's accomplished nothing. Millions of your tax dollars have been wasted on interdiction. Has demand for the white powder gone down in the U.S.? Has the supply disappeared or the price gone up? Plan Colombia pays for military training and equipment and chemical sprays — made by Monsanto — that have been used even in areas where there's never been coca cultivation. They fumigated Departamento de Bolívar, where rich gold deposits have been mined for years in a very rustic way by the local people. Several towns were fumigated just to force the people to move.

And spraying destroys not only the coca plants but other flora and fauna. Bird-watchers know there is no place in the world like Colombia, with its rich biodiversity. It's a paradise of birds. And these places are now being fumigated and the birds poisoned. And who gets displaced? Mostly poor peasants. There are more internally displaced people in Colombia than in any other country in the Western Hemisphere. Between 2.5 and 3 million people have been driven from their homes.

Lefer: Robin Kirk is an investigator with Human Rights Watch. She's written extensively about the conflict and has spent a lot of time in Colombia at great personal risk. I've heard her say — and I don't know if this is also the position of Human Rights Watch — that she's not entirely against U.S. military

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aid to Colombia, because it may give us some leverage with the government.

Aristizábal: Leverage? When the appropriations are debated in Congress, no one debates whether military aid to Colombia is a good policy. It's all about whether the contract for helicopters should go to Sikorsky in Connecticut or Bell in Texas. So they compromise and split it.

I would be very happy if Americans understood that they have an important role to play in history, and that it's not the role of empire. But I hear myself starting to preach, and that's not what I want to do. My work these days is about creating a space for imagination and conversation and listening. It's not about telling people "the truth," or telling anybody else what to do.

Lefer: That sounds like the realization that inspired Augusto Boal to create Theater of the Oppressed.

Aristizábal: Yes, about thirty-five years ago Boal and his theater company traveled to the northeast of Brazil and performed an agitprop drama for peasants whose land was being taken away. The play ended with the actors raising their rifles in the air — they were just props, of course — and calling on everyone to "spill our blood for the land." So the peasant leaders said, "OK, let's do it, and you join us." That's when Boal realized he had no right to tell people to run risks he wasn't willing to take himself. Instead of taking up arms, he began to use theater to help people articulate their *own* goals and strategies.

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