

Martyr's Mirror

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*The names of certain people and organizations
have been changed to protect privacy.*

— Ed.

Two shotgun-wielding sheriff's deputies barred our entry through the gates of the naval transmitter station, but our group of twenty-one protesters radiated the assurance of the overly prepared. We had trained a whole month for this moment. Though the deputies couldn't tell from looking at us, we were skilled in the art of moral jujitsu. If only they knew that we weren't a bunch of peacenik hippie agitators but religious activists who had the backing of God's holy word. If only they knew that we were pacifists but not *passive*-ists. Sure, we wouldn't resist arrest, but that didn't mean we were a bunch of sissies either.

I think I secretly yearned for these men to hurt us, if only so we could demonstrate to the world our newfound ability to righteously receive a pummeling and not punch back.

We were the soon-to-be graduates of the Christian Alliance for Nonviolence Class of 2001, peaceful foot soldiers in the army of God. We took a step forward.

I'd first learned about the Christian Alliance for Nonviolence (CAN) the summer after I'd graduated from divinity school. I was bumming my way around the Guatemalan highlands when I boarded a bus bound for Chiapas, Mexico. Twelve hours later I set foot in the mountain hamlet of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. This was the country that had helped inspire Graham Greene to write his novel *The Power and the Glory*. I'd read the book in a divinity-school ethics class and been hooked by his characters — depraved sinners who still ached with desire for God. The whiskey priest in the book, despite his obvious flaws, renounced everything — even his life — to save his people. Could I do the same?

To be honest, what I had in mind was more a vague notion of *helping* people. My parents had been missionaries in Nicaragua and later in Nigeria, and though I didn't share their evangelistic zeal, I had inherited from them a sense that a life of faith was an adventure. I was a cross between Thomas Merton and Indiana Jones: desirous of spiritual depth but with little patience for digging. I craved *action*, and I thought Chiapas — site of the 1994 Zapatista peasant revolution — was a good place to find some.

I arrived in June 2000, six years too late for the revolution, but there were still soldiers and army bases everywhere; more than seventy thousand troops, a third of the Mexican military, were based in Chiapas. Wanting to serve the cause of the oppressed Mayan farmers, I spent my first few days in San Cristóbal banging on the doors of nongovernmental organizations. None was especially interested in hiring a twenty-something gringo with no experience. (My one accomplishment as an activist had been to get arrested the previous year at Fort Benning, Georgia, protesting the U.S. Army's School of the Americas — a state-terrorist-training facility.) They wouldn't even let me volunteer. But a few of them directed me to the Christian Alliance for Nonviolence. Judging by how people spoke of it ("There is *one* group that might take you"), CAN was where the excess volunteers ended up. No one seemed to know exactly what the Alliance members did. Some spoke of them as "parachute peacemakers" who flew in

wanting to do good but lacked experience on the ground in a war zone. A German woman who worked for a well-funded peace organization said, "I sink zey just, you know, hang around in ze willage."

The most attractive thing for me about CAN was that it worked closely with Las Abejas. Some five thousand strong, Las Abejas — "the Bees" — were a Catholic civil society of Mayan peasants unified by their faith and their opposition to the Mexican government. They named themselves after bees because they were many in number; they prized the communal over the individual, and, like bees, they took their marching orders from a queen — in this case, God. What distinguished Las Abejas from other opposition groups in Latin America was their consistent refusal to use violence. Impoverished and abandoned by the Church hierarchy, they had decided to take what Jesus said literally and to stake their lives on his command to love our enemies.

And some of them had lost their lives. In 1997 Las Abejas had been attacked by government-sponsored paramilitaries. Using guns and machetes, the attackers had killed forty-five men, women, and children.

I had read about these modern-day martyrs in my last year of divinity school and had been inspired by their impossibly moral response to the world's cruelties. I wanted to stand with them before another paramilitary attack could occur. But when I approached the CAN team in Chiapas and asked about working with Las Abejas, they told me I'd first have to travel to Minneapolis, Minnesota, for "basic training" in how to be a nonviolent Christian activist.

Six months later I stood outside CAN headquarters on a Minneapolis sidewalk that was covered with a foot of snow. I was looking at a thirty-day stint in pacifist boot camp, after which I would return to Chiapas as an agent of nonviolent intervention and work with my beloved Las Abejas. And when my stint in Chiapas was over — well, then I'd leave CAN. I was prepared to take risks, sure, but I wasn't about to go get shot at by Israeli soldiers or have my body end up in a river in Colombia. I much preferred the scenic Mexican peacemaking tour that included quaint mountain "willages," hot showers, and free-spirited NGO women.

"I'm a proud member of the worldwide movement for social change," our instructor, Brad, said to our class of twenty that first day. Brad was a member of one of the historic Anabaptist peace churches. "But I'm also into *magic*," he said, his eyes flashing. During training he would be teaching us not only how to stay calm in violent situations, but also how to sustain a life of peacemaking through myth, ritual, and communal ecstasy. He wanted to reveal right up front that he was "struggling" with his Christian convictions and was "in a time of spiritual exploration."

Myth? Communal ecstasy? I began to wonder if Brad, with his elfish eyeglasses, curly locks, and preternaturally deep voice, wasn't some kind of druid.

We went around the room and introduced ourselves. There was the laconic Canadian who would later go on to serve val-

iantly in Hebron and Iraq, sending witty e-mails about his bullet-dodging feats. There was the thin-mustached, effeminate priest from Texas. There was the Brit who for twenty years had worked as a nuclear engineer building up the Crown's store of warheads until one day he'd had a dramatic conversion experience, quit his job, and become a full-time peace activist.

The rest of the group were twenty-somethings like me: young men and women who wanted to do something bold and meaningful; wanderers flying their own versions of the progressive-anarcho-syndicalist-Green-Jesus banner, each looking for purpose and thinking it might be found in a war zone. We were middle-class Christian kids in thrift-store clothing — or, for the truly ambitious, homemade clothing — who wanted to publicize our downward mobility. For someone of our ilk, going off to Palestine or Chiapas as a peace worker was a hip thing to do. It garnered a certain cachet among our peers back in Atlanta or Brooklyn or Toronto. Before coming to Minneapolis, all of us had thought that we were unique, that only we would do something so crazy-cool. As I listened to these others introduce themselves, I saw my own sullied motives reflected back to me.

The first day of training was long and dull. There were lengthy abstract discussions of such subjects as Race, Class, and Non-violence — big ideas ripped from their narrative moorings and made devoid of context or comprehensibility. What I found most irksome was a stunt Brad pulled called “noticing.” We were in the midst of a group discussion about Gender Inequality when Brad piped up. “I’d like to *notice* something,” he said, pronouncing the word “new-tiss.” “I’d like to notice that, for the past twenty minutes, I’ve been the only man in the room who has contributed to the gender discussion.” Subtext: *The rest of you are a bunch of misogynists who need to get with the program.*

“Noticing” was one of many group-process techniques I came to loathe during my month in Minneapolis. These passive-aggressive attacks were always dished out with a veneer of humility, as if the noticer were somehow performing a public service. Brad employed an arsenal of such parlor tricks to exert power over us. If you fell under the gaze of his noticing, he would cock his head at you, wizard eyes a blue blur behind wire rims, and give a smirk as if to say, *So you really want to join the worldwide movement for social change? Then you have more work to do, my friend. Much more.*

By the end of that first day I suspected that Brad and I wouldn't get along. Naif that I was, though, I tipped my hand and told Brad that I *really* wanted to get placed on the Chiapas project so I could live and work with my heroes Las Abejas.

“Well,” Brad said, “what *you* want may not be in the best interests of CAN.” The need for Spanish-speaking volunteers was much greater in Colombia, for example, than in Chiapas.

My confession had served only to increase Brad's power over me. I was beginning to wonder if getting to work with Las Abejas was worth all this rigmarole. But it was only the first day. I decided to stick it out.

We bundled up and trudged through dirty snow to our

sleeping quarters in an old Methodist church a few miles from CAN headquarters. There weren't any beds, so we all slept in the sanctuary: women spread out on the altar, men in the balcony. The balcony was small, and there wasn't enough room for the ten of us to stretch out. It was also hot up there. I tried lying on top of my sleeping bag, but I woke before dawn feeling chilled. I pulled the bag over my legs only to wake an hour later soaked in sweat. A month of this was out of the question; I would need to find better quarters.

On the second night I moved down to a carpeted corner of the fellowship hall. I was away from my bunkmates' snoring and coughing and farting, but it was still too hot. My inability to find physical comfort seemed to mirror my uneasiness about CAN and my doubts about whether I was cut out for the austere life of a would-be martyr.

On the third night I descended lower still, into the basement of the church. There, around the corner from the one shower all twenty of us shared, I found a narrow hallway with a short flight of stairs leading up to an exit that wasn't properly sealed, allowing in a steady stream of January night air. It must have been forty-five degrees in the hall — ideal camping weather — and on that third night sleep floated before me like a silver platter bearing a cold, delicious feast.

Once word had spread about my sleeping arrangements, my teammates gave me concerned looks. They offered to make more room for me upstairs or to turn down the heat. But I was happy in my little cave. I felt like a hibernating bear who might bite if provoked. One of the women took to calling me “Ice Man.” “Look,” she'd say when I would emerge from my underground lair at breakfast time, “the Ice Man cometh.”

Besides the cave, my only solace during training was “life stories.” This was the hour each night when one of us told his or her story. Initially I'd thought that, after sitting in a circle all day with these people, I'd find listening to them tell their life stories a horrific chore, but I came to look forward to this ritual. A life story, even one badly told, is still a story. I learned things about my teammates that, against my better judgment, endeared them to me. The thin-mustached priest, for example, recited poetry by Gerard Manley Hopkins from memory. I remember his weighty pause before the last lines of “God's Grandeur,” how I could almost see the Holy Spirit brooding over our bent world with “ah! bright wings.”

(end of excerpt)