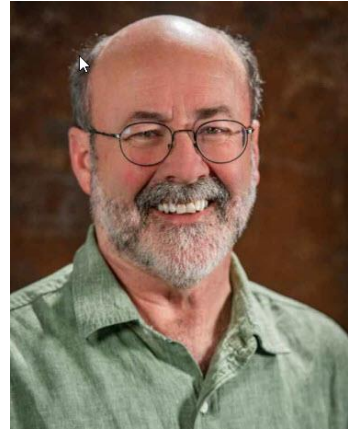


I Do Not Want to Tell This Story

Michael Seifert



I have a friend who is a woman of the Quiche people. She lives near the highland region of Guatemala. Survival has been the mode of life for most of her people, most of the time. She has dedicated her own life to healing the various physical, psychological and spiritual wounds that her community suffers.

I checked in with her last week, with COVID19 on my mind.

She told me that things were tough. The Guatemalan government had closed down her small town. People were only allowed out of their homes for two hours a day and that social contact in her area was strictly policed. This was fine for controlling infections, she said, “But we are poor people. We don’t have big refrigerators or spaces to stockpile food. We must go to the market everyday.”

Now one had any money for food.

Just before the town was quarantined, dozens of people had arrived in her small town walking down from the high mountains. “There is starvation up there,” my friend said. After a pause, she added, “I saw the saddest thing this morning. I was out for a brief moment and I found an older woman sitting on the curb. She was drinking from a bottle of corn liquor. The woman told me, ‘It’s cheaper than beans and its helps with the hunger pangs.’ ”

Over the past three years, the United States federal immigration enforcement apparatus decided to try and seal off our country from those it deemed “undesirable.” The actions of the

Department of Homeland Security included the Muslim ban, the intentional and permanent separation of children from their parents, the refusal to allow asylum seekers their lawful entry into the United States, and, most recently, the practice of expulsion. Under expulsion, anyone that the border patrol detains is immediately returned to Mexico, whether or not they are in true danger of death, whether or not the person has the absolute right under US law to be present and to be placed into a proper immigration process. (Border Patrol claims that children under the age of 12 who are travelling alone are placed with the Office of Refugee Resettlement, while children older than 12 are put on a plane back to their home country).

Immigration hardliners disingenuously claim this tough enforcement is an effort to deter immigration in the first place. That is, make the experience of immigration so horrific that no one would want to even consider that as an option. The deterrence mode of immigration enforcement has been in operation since the 1990s and it has never worked. Despite border wall construction, despite the tens of thousands of border patrol agents, US army troops, highway patrol agents and other “boots on the ground”, people have continued to come north to seek safety for their children.

Why is that? There are many answers, all well documented but one salient reason is that the horrors in Guatemala (in this case) are beyond tolerance. No father will stay in a place that puts his son in mortal danger (which is the case in an area controlled by organized crime). Once a daughter turns thirteen, no sensible mother will remain in a town in which girls that age are considered appropriate targets for rape—a criminal act are seldom prosecuted. For many people, living in Guatemala, El Salvador or Honduras is accepting a death sentence for their families.

And so they flee.

In these last months, however, conditions have worsened. The violence of criminal gangs remains unchecked, but now there are crop failures, and people are starving. For many Central Americans, the imminent crush of COVID19 will be the straw that broke the camel's back, and they, too, will join the flight north, to the United States.

In the recent past, when these families crossed into the United States, they sought out a border patrol agent. They were seeking apprehension, so that they could begin the process of claiming asylum. As asylum seekers have told me over and over again, they are not interested in being illegal. They want their day in court. They are convinced that their experience in their home countries would be compelling enough to meet the standards of an asylum case.

Now, however, when an asylum seeking family reaches the United States, they are denied the very possibility of asking for asylum. Surrendering to the border patrol is no longer an option for them. It seems clear to me that the next chapter in this sad history of immigration into the United States will be these families doing their level best to avoid apprehension. With the aid of smugglers, and with the bold courage born in the act of saving a child, they will try to make their way across the Rio Grande, and then venture into the a wilderness known as the Wild Horse desert.

In our section of the border, part of this desert is in Brooks County, just about sixty miles north of McAllen. Not everyone who enters that desert survives. The Brooks County sheriff has a gruesome photo collection of the bodies that he has recovered over the years. Most all of the pictures stored in the large binders he has are of the bodies of men, although there are some women.

Last week, I had that collection of photos in mind when I joined a conference call that sought to organize the work of the many wise and good people dedicated to protecting the most vulnerable children in Texas. I tried to explain the impact of the expulsion practice put in place by the US government. I told the group that the “push factors” for immigration from Guatemala was once the unimaginable misery of poverty. Added to this was the armed violence of the army visited upon civilians, and, over time, the dread of living in a land ruled by gang members.

“People are not going to stop fleeing this horror. For the sake of their families, they must leave. But now, instead of trusting that the United States has a noble law for the treatment of people like them, their journeys will take them into the deserts around the border. The most vulnerable child in Texas,” I said, “will be the nine year old girl walking with her mother through the Wild Horse desert come this June.”

That is a story that I do not want to tell.

Michael Seifert