NHLSCP: Thinking About Mission — and the Environment

By Joy Gordon

You might have noticed that NHLSCP has been doing more around environmental issues, and about climate change. A few of our long-time supporters have asked us—“So what’s going on? We thought you guys were doing education work in Goyena, not something as broad and global as climate change.”

Most of our energies and resources are still going to education: the preschool program, the after school program, the secondary school, and working with parents and community leaders to support these. We also work closely with the community in their struggle for safe and just working conditions in the sugar plantations of the Ingenio San Antonio. NH/LSCP’s present focus on education continues to be rooted in our long term commitment of enhancing autonomy in the lives of Nicaraguans.

Our Current Goals/Mission

We’ve historically framed our work and our relationship within certain paradigms:

1. We’ve always looked at our relation to Nicaragua through a political lens: In the 1980s, we started by asking the question: where do power and legitimacy reside—in the state or the people? And as an organization we arrived at the view that we would not accept the foreign policy of the US government, which was one of supporting civil war, terrorism, and regime change; but would establish our own foreign policy, as citizens, which was based on respect and equality.

2. We’ve also always looked through an ethical lens: what is our moral obligation to a country whose welfare is so impacted by our government’s policies, both military and economic?

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Thinking About Mission (continued)

3. We’ve traditionally also looked at economic development, in several regards: transportation (bicycles); material aid, agriculture;

4. To a lesser degree we’ve looked at social issues, particularly the recurring problem of domestic violence; and when we were primarily doing urban work, there were programs like the playroom at the hospital, and sponsoring girls at La Recollecction.

Within the environmental paradigm, our relation to Nicaragua is not as visibly direct in the way it was with the political paradigm: that our government was funding a civil war with our tax dollars. Environmentally, our relation is more general and attenuated, but US business, political and lifestyle choices related to the environment do have an impact on Nicaragua.

If we look back at NH/LSCP’s history, as we did recently in reflecting on this issue, in fact much of our work has involved environmental issues: sustainable agriculture; family gardens; school gardens; our responses to Hurricane Mitch; the model farm; the water delegation; and Nicaragua Sugar Estates issues related to pesticides, cane burning, and water use. Goyena itself is a community that was created as a result of displacement after Hurricane Mitch. The mudslide near Leon, causing loss of life and displacing an entire community, was related to the deforestation.

While our mission and vision is still social justice, in the context of an equitable bicultural relation –there was a point when the Sister City Project made a significant shift. A few years back we decided to shift from working with the urban population in the Leon region, to the rural population. Our reasoning was that, in Nicaragua, the poverty in rural areas is much more severe. This also meant that environmental issues became integral to what we do, in a way that was not as true when our work was primarily urban.

So, while we had not previously talked explicitly making environmental issues a focus of our work, we have regularly addressed or witnessed issues involving, for example:

- Resilience (or vulnerability) in the face of environmental events.
- That in a rural community, poverty is inextricably tied to the land and the environment.
- Adequate land and sufficiency of water for subsistence farming and potable drinking water.
- Outside employment—with Nicaragua Sugar Estates—ties the community to abusive labor and environmental practices, and to farming practices that result in significant health impact.

Environmental issues can have a huge impact on the quality of the life of people in rural Nicaragua, and climate change has the potential to cause massive, long term damage, in the way that Hurricane Mitch did in 1998. Given our commitment to social justice, we want to find ways that our communities, in both the US and Nicaragua, can be active in efforts to change the policies that have already done so much damage to Goyena.

Thank you for your continuing support, and we look forward to hearing your contributions to this conversation!

Joy Gordon is a NH/LSCP Co-President, Professor of Philosophy at Fairfield University and the author of a recently published book Invisible War on the sanctions in Iraq.

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3. Some of our new selections:
   - Haitian star ornaments & metal art made by artisan co-ops
   - Organic Hot Cocoa & Coffees from Chiapas & Indonesia
   - Eco Teas: Yerba Mate, South African Rooibos & Indian Tulsi
   - Tahini made from Nicaraguan sesame seeds
   - Mola ornaments from Panama

Our all-time favorites too:
   - Colorful woven products and organic coffee from Nicaragua
   - Hand-painted crafts from El Salvador
   - Olive Oil from Palestine
   - African cloth-bound photo albums, journals
   - Pacifica soaps & lotions

Including the return of:
   - Brushdance calendars & engagement books
   - Siena hand-made scented candles

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Mauricio stares at me with wide eyes, adding to my anxiety. He is clearly eager to learn what two of my peers and I are about to teach him. This is a new experience for me, having never taught young children before. It is the second day of a program to teach him and his preschool classmates basic concepts such as colors and shapes, but he has never met me before. I missed the first day of the week of teaching, laying in bed sick all day thinking about how much I was missing. I would not be able to see the group of four-year olds in the village of Goyena who were so excited to learn on that June Tuesday. Making a good first impression on Mauricio and the other children would be important, and it is for these reasons why I am nervous.

And yet, despite all this, Mauricio makes it easy for me to feel comfortable. As soon as I start teaching him the difference between green and red, a square and a circle, he enthusiastically begins showing off what he has learned, holding up a yellow felt triangle and describing it to his classmates. They respond in a similar way, holding up red circles and green squares, showing that they too have mastered the topic. I look up from the children to my friends from the States, who, like the Nicaraguan preschoolers and me, are sitting on one-foot high chairs. They smile at me, jubilant that we have made some progress with the kids, and I smile back. I then look around the rest of the twenty by twenty-five one room schoolhouse, watching the other dozen American high school students and thirty Goyenans schoolchildren. They, too, have accomplished what Mauricio and I have, and again, I smile.

From there, our group of teachers goes to the other side of the village to assist students our age in learning English. I am nervous again having also missed the class with the high school students the previous day. However, I have a bit of confidence as I have my first teaching experience behind me. We sit outside this time on plastic lawn chairs arranged in a circle. I sit next to one of my peers as we face three Goyenans between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. Only one of the three was present the day before, and he smiles at us, anticipating another productive day of English lessons. The other two are less friendly, as they do not know what to expect. I ask their names; the returnee says “Orlando”, the other two mumble their names shyly. We begin with some basic translation activities, and at first, only Orlando is willing to participate fully. As the day proceeds, the two newcomers begin to come out of their shells, and by the end of the class, they are smiling and talking as much as Orlando.

The end of the week of teaching soon came, and by that time, I felt that the other American student and I had helped the three Nicaraguan students to build a solid English base. I thought that Orlando, though, had gone above and beyond what I ever could have expected. Not only did he do the activities we had given the students with great fervor, but he also asked us for more homework and word sheets for him to take home. I had never expected this to happen. I could picture Orlando being in my own grade in the United States, learning diligently as a good student does. I had not expected such keenness and devotion to study from the Nicaraguans when I first signed up for the trip. As Orlando recited a paragraph in English to his entire class and the American teachers as a sort of final exam, I thought some about what I had taught him, but mostly about what he had shown me.

Matt Klein was a member of the 2010 Hopkins/Mann delegation and lives in Trumbull, Connecticut.
The New Haven/Leόn Sister City Project is organizing a delegation to travel to Leόn, Nicaragua in February 19th to 26th (tentative) 2011. The delegation will be composed of educators and other interested individuals, and will:

- Investigate education in Nicaragua, its challenges and its strengths.
- Spend time in the rural community of Goyena meeting with students, community leaders and educators.
- Participate in activities/workshops to support NHLSCP education projects in Goyena, and explore with the community ways North Americans can support education in Nicaragua once the delegates return.
- Explore the natural beauty of Nicaragua.

The cost of the trip is $1200 for the program fee (includes housing, food, transportation, translation, all workshops and site visits). Delegates are responsible for airfare and transportation to/from the US airport. Delegates will stay with host families in Leόn. Some partial scholarships are available. For more information go to www.newhavenleon.org, write to Chris at nh@newhavenleon.org or call 203.562.1607.

Space is limited. Please respond as soon as possible. Deadline December 5th.

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2011 Education Delegation to Nicaragua

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You hear it everywhere and from everyone: the elderly, the elementary schools, men and women, government officials, NGOs, the countryside and the cities. I even heard it once at a climate change conference! Nicaraguans talkin’ trash. Rather, they’re talking about trash and how it’s overtaking the country, literally. Apparently, there’s an entire island of trash in Lake Managua. And not only do you hear about trash, you see it and smell it too.

Trash has long been an issue in Nicaragua, which is evident by the stickers that cover the public buses. Peeling and faded, they depict Tweety bird imploring the population not to throw their sandwich bags or Coke out the window. Although some may speculate that trash accumulation has grown more recently due to the introduction of snack foods (aka globalization), the mere fact that Tweety bird is the spokes“bird” for the trash campaign speaks to the longevity of the trash problem, with or without snack size bags of Doritos. If these trash campaigns are to be successful in 2010, it may be helpful to update the spokesperson to Spongebob Square Pants or Shrek.

Unfortunately, the trash campaign needs a little more help than just a change in mascot. Many Nicaraguans believe their trash contamination issues stem from their culture. I have never heard trash framed in this way and was at first reluctant to agree that Nicaraguans were somehow more culturally prone to throw trash into the streets than their Costa Rican neighbors to the South. However, this comparison is used frequently in trash debates. I heard a story from a friend of mine that seems to corroborate this trash difference in culture. Supposedly, there is a park in San José that is frequented by Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica. How can you tell that only Nicaraguans go there? Because the area outside the park is completely clean, while the inside is FULL of trash. Another example I have heard of this cultural trash difference is what Nicaraguans do with their trash when they travel from Costa Rica back home again. Knowing that Ticos would look down on them if they threw the trash out of the window, Nicas keep their trash with them on the bus while in Costa Rica. The minute the bus crosses the border, windows open, and out goes the trash!

Yet, the widespread scattering of trash, whether cultural or not, is only a piece of the problem. Although Nicaraguans may consider the improper disposal of trash to be a cultural issue, it doesn’t change the fact that they are a proud people and keep their yards and front stoops clean. There may be a parade one day and the streets can be full of trash, but you can be sure that the trash will be gone the next day. Unfortunately, the majority of this trash is collected and burned, including used toilet paper, plastics, and food wastes, which contributes to air pollution. The accumulation and burning is then combined with torrential downpours, and any loose trash along the highways or in the streets is washed into rivers and lakes, contaminating them. The excess trash also creates breeding grounds for mosquitoes that carry malaria and dengue along with flies that carry other diseases.

The government seems to manage the best it can with waste disposal services, but many of Nicaragua’s communities are located in rural areas, outside of these services. Goyena is no exception. The community is forced to burn their trash or see it washed through the streets and into the river when the rains come. The community speaks a lot about their trash problems, saying that the overabundance only adds to the sicknesses that plague the community due to pesticides from the neighboring sugar cane crops.

I spent the summer in Nicaragua hoping to work with governments, other NGOs, and community members on climate change adaptation projects but spent the whole summer talking about trash. It seems to be the number one concern of the country, yet the problem is growing, one plastic bag at a time. Nicaraguans are clearly aware of the implications an excess of trash can have, seeing as how it literally makes them sick. Yet, the lack of infrastructure, or funding as it is sometimes called, won’t allow for the success of a new trash campaign, even with Shrek as its poster boy (poster ogre?). So even though Nicas might talk a lot of trash, they still need help backing it up.