

“Your Solidarity Radiates Light in Our Hearts”

by

Lucy Luna Guzmán

(Translated by Eloise Clawson)

Santa Ana, El Salvador, Central America

In many cultures “the light” is a symbol of death, nevertheless for others, it is the energy that feeds and it is the Holy Spirit, Nirvana, faith, hope. Many people are dedicated to the investigation of the energy of the body, objects, or stars in order to learn our connection with the universe. On this side of the planet where we live, often the shadows of powerful egotists, those that worship money, liars and white collar murders make it difficult to see this “light”. It is difficult to stay standing without cursing, it is difficult to believe in people and at times we become enemies without understanding why... simply because it is infuriating to see reality.



In this grey world there are marvelous beings that constantly see “the light” and are able to understand the world in a transparent way, able to transform the grey into one of colors, birds, suns and moons. But above all else they are filled with a potent light that connects us all, the hope, the utopia, the faith, this spirit of light that connects us. The adults no longer see. Those of whom I speak, those who are capable of transforming the grey world they are the boys, the girls and the adolescents.

Yes, they are the beings that we forget, that we have sentenced to a slow premature death, to domestic torture, to the abuse of their body as private property of others. We are mutilating their dreams, we are teaching them to hate, we are ignoring their voices, but even worse, we do not want to see that they are “the light” that we need in order to construct a more equitable world.



The Barefoot Angels’ program was born more than ten years ago, in my country of El Salvador, in the department of Santa Ana. There thousands of boys and girls work helping their parents survive by selling clothes, fruit, spices, salt, garlic and facing the market of life with conditions where no one has rights, where the only thing important is selling.

Other boys and girls have to recycle garbage because of the same marginalization. They also live in forgotten neighborhoods, full of hunger and as they grow up they become filled with hate and continue the messages of the adults, “that which is important is to be rich. One exists as a person when one is capable of consuming goods and one recognizes they have control in their lives when they can impose their own interest on others”. Gangs or anarchy groups are formed. They fight to defend their origin, their social class, their culture and their world. These groups have been invented in order to control power and they appear more like us as adults.



The Barefoot Angels program was conceived to combat this reality, to improve the development of the boys, girls and adolescents who are disadvantaged because they are working children, poor and marginalized. In order to support them we have sought sensible professionals capable of understanding “the light” within the boys and girls and the importance of making it as a spiritual struggle, conscientious, just, strong and in solidarity in order to build communities that are less violent and more united.

To do this, we know it is necessary to share power because in this way we are teaching values and at the same time we are teaching that this planet is for everyone and they are also responsible for taking care of it. We want to teach the children to make decisions and remain firm since this concrete jungle is led by adults who are in charge and it is difficult to share power.

We have a psychologist who provides intensive treatments of the children and youth in order to heal their hearts. They learn to rediscover themselves, to love themselves, to care for themselves and to value themselves because the adults they have known do not believe they are important.

In addition, we have educators who understand their language and their limitations. They have space to learn and understand the world of formal education and become students. Previously many adults have denied them the right to education. Here they learn they have the right to begin to understand this world where they live.

We have social workers who listen to their voices, help them understand their origin and to forgive their past. They teach them to share, to play, to laugh, and to learn the significance of community and their rights as citizens and human beings. The social workers teach them to be responsible when they make decisions, to share power and how to make their voices heard even though the adults don't want to listen, don't hear or fail to see their reality.



We have youth who have grown up defending their life and their dignity. These are Barefoot Angels that have been in the program since its inception and now they are older. Some have studied in the university, others work in some factory, but at the same time they want to be in solidarity with boy and girls in the Barefoot Angels program. We have taken a dream and converted it into a Barefoot Angel which is a youth that does not kill, that does not rob, one who has not joined a gang or band of delinquents, one who believes in love and in the possibility of transforming oneself and supporting their community so that it becomes more human and less violent.

As adults who work to defend the rights of the working children, we were very frustrated when two adolescents, Roalbin Calderón and José Aguilar, entered the Barefoot Angels project two years ago and only stayed one year. In that year we tried to get to know them

and understand all the suffering, fears and anger they felt. Unfortunately for lack of resources, we couldn't give them the specialized attention they needed because their history was one of abandonment, abuse, alcoholism, and exploitation. They came to the project looking for a reason to continue. They had leadership abilities, were creative, they desired to struggle and to become someone... they never gave up.

They needed to resolve not only their emotional state but they also needed resources to study, to eat, and to buy the things that were advertised on the television. Advertising talked to the youth about what is real, modern, and to be a consumer (cell phones, brand name clothes, perfume, brand name shoes, fast foods, jewels). The pressure was great and after the first year they left the program. We worried about them because we knew they were not prepared to continue alone but we had to continue our work with the rest of the Barefoot Angels.

Sadly Roalbin and José sought the shorter and easier route. They robbed and killed an upper-class boy, stealing all of his beautiful and brilliant things that they had always dreamed of having. It cost the life of the other boy and today his family weeps inconsolably.

To see the newspaper photo of Roalbin and José walking to jail filled with delinquents, gang members, drug traffickers, and murders caused us to reflect on our commitment and the value of our work. At times we stop dreaming, thinking that we have done enough, but what if we had done more? We don't want this to happen again, but it seems there are fewer adults who understand this.

Today more than 260 boys, girls and adolescents form the program of Barefoot Angels. Many of these children are similar to Roalbin and José as they struggle to defend their own life. When we return to the project and see children playing, jumping, believing, struggling, developing themselves, we return to our path, sure that it is the only formula for crossing the river against the current. It is so that these same children can do it for themselves if they are supported by adults and thus we are able to be a firm and strong bridge.

We only need adults to remember their own childhoods and reconsider "the light" that shines in the hearts filled with hope. Thank you to all those adults who continue with us, as we take the hands of the working children of El Salvador so that they can have a different history. A story filled with dignity and untiring struggle to realize their dreams - such as the stories of José Luis, Gerson, Marlene, Gustavo, Oscar, Jennifer, Melvin, Wendy, Eduardo, Flor, Giovanni, Vladimir and many, many more...

Thanks for the magic, the smiles, the solidarity, the hugs, yoga, games, songs, handicrafts, books, bags, pencils, clothes, and shoes; but above all, thanks for seeing the true love in the hearts of the boys and girls who are poor.

Once we asked the children, what do they most appreciate in the Barefoot Angels' project? One of the smallest girls responded: "We are thankful that when we arrive at the project you support us. For us that is love, because our lives would not be the same without this..." This is the light that radiates our hearts.