



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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### “The Journey to Nicaragua,”

Testimonials Given by Nan Rusk, Aidan Wertz, Jess Liebermann and Connor Wertz  
on May 31, 2015

Nan Rusk: Many of you have asked, “What was it like in Nicaragua?” I’d like to share a snapshot of what we experienced. The story begins with rising early, reflecting, praying or reading often with coffee in hand. Then a call to assist with the carrying in the dishes from the main house where a delicious meal of rice, bean, eggs, plantain, and fruit prepared by women, some with education that would land them a professional job if one existed. After breakfast a guest speaker would come in to speak about Nicaragua, the revolution, the conditions of the people, the US support of the Somoza dictatorships responsible for the impoverishment of many Nicaraguans. And then the update with how the Sandinistas now in power have attempted to create better conditions by socializing health care and education.

With our heads filled with a better understanding of our host country we would go about our workday mixing and pouring cement into molds or making rebar for strengthening the walls to withstand earthquakes and that were to become the third medical building for the Campo clinic started by the CDCA in Nueva Vida. Other days we traveled up a steep dusty road in a trailer behind a tractor to the organic coffee cooperative, and on another to the sesame cooperative some miles away to dig out pipes that needed to be moved. I was so impressed by how far these humble and war torn people have come in developing economic sustainability and are doing so organically. The work and excursions were experienced 95 degrees heat and humidity, and there had been no rain for months. The rainy season was due in just a couple of weeks.

Aside from the work and education I was personally struck by the beautiful murals which you will see during the slide show at coffee hour. Many of the murals depicted bringing food to feed the people, working the field, providing healthcare information, and landscapes. Our trip to the Managua Cultural Center is where I found my favorite mural “Nuevo Amanecer” or “New Dawn,” created by artists from several countries. It depicts Che Guevara, Augusto César Sandino, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, Carlos Fonseca founder of the Sandinista liberation front, Nobel Prize Guatemalan Rigoberto Menchu, and women martyred during the revolution. This mural brings together politics and Christianity as the scene surrounds the baby Jesus, making a bold statement that God is with us. We stayed to attend Mass which is celebrated each week by a liberation theologian.

Our evenings were spent returning to the compound having dinner, sharing reflections of the day and opening cards from many of you which let us know that you were a presence on this trip with us.

Aidan Wertz: I will be reading a poem, which you can find in your order of service, by Tomas Borge: a founder of the Sandinista National Liberation Front who was jailed in 1976. Tomas was handcuffed for 7 months and had a bag over his head for 9 months. The poem is titled "My Personal Revenge".

My personal revenge will be the right  
of your children to school and flowers;  
My personal revenge will be to offer you  
this florid song without fears;  
My personal revenge will be to show you  
the good there is in the eyes of my people,  
always unyielding in combat  
and most steadfast and generous in victory.  
my personal revenge will be to say to you  
good morning, without beggars on the streets,  
when instead of jailing you I intend you shake the sorrow from your eyes;  
when you, practitioner of torture,  
can no longer so much as lift your gaze,  
my personal revenge will be to offer you  
these hands you once maltreated  
without being able to make them forsake  
tenderness.  
And it was the people who hated you most  
when the song was language of violence;  
But the people today beneath its skin  
of red and black has its heart uplifted.

"But the people today, beneath its skin of red and black (the colors of the Sandinista political party) has its heart uplifted."

How does this poem relate to our trip? It sings a song - the song of the Sandinista ideals, the song of Nicaraguan ideals. This is a song of hope. As our volunteer coordinator Daniel, Jessica's brother, said, "Hope is something Nica's are good at".

When Borge writes, "My personal revenge will be to say to you good morning, without beggars on the streets" I ask the question: Is it a good morning? He addresses someone in particular with this line: "When you, practitioner of torture." Remember the hood? YOU, practitioner of torture.

What, me? No - all of us, us, the US, the United States of America who, headed by Reagan, heavily supported and funded the Contras to the bitter end in a civil war that devastated the Nicaraguan people. Us, the US because it is SO different a culture where misfortune is labeled as a cold streak at the lottery, where my friends at the high school worry about not wearing the same dress as somebody else at a party!

I am here today to tell you about something we discussed a little while in Nicaragua. Yes, we were valuable workers, but the education we received while in Central America is so important, and this

is something that I will never be able to thank the JHC and the CDCA for. Yes, the CDCA gained a few days of (haphazard) physical labor, but the UUCH of Haverhill gained 10 leaders and 10 VIP's - Very Inspired People.

And now I focus on when Borge writes, "When you, practitioner of torture, can no longer so much as lift your gaze," he writes, "My personal revenge will be to offer you these hands you once maltreated, without being able to make them forsake tenderness."

He wants peace in a world of violence. He wants to offer his hands to those who hurt him most and know that these hands will only offer kindness and hospitality. He wants to tell the people of the world that this is the way to fight injustice.

So I encourage you to be a leader. Be a very inspired person - it's great, trust me! I encourage you to ask questions about our trip and learn about what we experienced there. As Jessica said, "I confess, my love, that I do not want to be broken." I do not want to be broken, so let's heal together. Because I want to address the USA as "You, practitioner of peace." So that Tomas Borge may enact his personal revenge and say to you good morning, without beggars on the streets.

Jess Liebermann: So I'm not going to try to list off facts about poverty and hunger. Most of you know that stuff from the famine. I'm just going to try to help you do something about it. I want to put into perspective that these sandals cost \$40. Now I'm not a perfect person and I am going to completely honest I don't regret that. But I want to tell you that an extra \$15 was spent to add a layer of foam to them, and that another \$20 was spent on this symbol here. Now I know that we all buy and contribute to this system of buying and paying for items or services that we don't need. But the way that the majority of us have grown up it is going to be nearly impossible to change.

Our privilege of going to school, yet we all hated it. Our access to food whenever we want, yet we complain when our fridge is empty but in reality the fridge just isn't full of what you want. When not everything around the house gets done that you wanted to get done, but you didn't do anything to help. When it's too hot out and you don't have a-c but you have access to cold water. These are all examples of our privilege that are never going to change for most of us. But to make a difference, step one is to admit that. And also to admit that we are spoiled. We have more than enough and that that is completely and utterly wrong. But in most cases this will not change.

If that sounds like you then listen. If you don't think that you can give up everything you own and go live among the famished, then don't. But don't abuse your privilege. Use it. Use it and all the things that come with it to get a better view on what's going on outside of your TV. Use it to spread the word because most of this country's youth could care less about other countries who aren't doing as well as us. It's not their fault and it's not their parents. It's those who make a point to block out these things to themselves and others because they can't handle it. So use your privilege to block them out. Use it to get the message out about what really is going on. Now don't go home and just think about all that has been and is going to be said today because that's what I would do. I'm not gonna lie. but that's mistake number one. But go home and post something on Facebook. Call up your relatives. and put up a sign in your work place.

You know those people who go to people's doors and ask, "Would you like to hear about our Lord and savior Jesus Christ?" I'm sure you do. And you know why? They are persistent. So be persistent in lifting off this first world perspective of you and the ones around you. Because there is only one world and it's our job to take care of it. And being Americans who for the most part make a lot of money we have the most power to do so.

Because we are not New Englanders, we are not Americans, we are human beings. Animals. And you are supposed to care for your family, right? Well guess what? My family is same as you: *hominidae*, that's our family. That's science. Same as the people in Ohio, California, Mexico, Nicaragua, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and anyone who's crazy enough to live in Antarctica. all *hominidae*, all animals. All I'm saying is care for your family and use your privilege to do it.

Connor Wertz: Returning from Nicaragua was a different tale for each one of us and therefore it becomes hard to really capture what it felt like because it was on such an individual and personal level, but I think I can speak for all who traveled down to Nicaragua that it took time to accept life in America again. Writing this I originally placed readjust, or return to our lives instead of accept but that is not what is happening, at least for me. Although there is true poverty and many, many problems here in Haverhill, Nicaragua has given me a global view of poverty that recently has been serving as a touchstone of sorts, a grounding measure that I can base my decisions off of, and with this new perspective all of my problems at least are dwarfed in comparison - and in fact it's a nice relief for a change. I am glad to say that my bubble, a bubble which all children should have the privilege to grow up in but rarely do, will never be able to be blown up to quite the same degree of naiveté, thanks to this trip and an adolescence full of soup kitchens and 30 hour famines.

In spite of this whole perspective thing however, I was swept almost immediately upon arrival to a host of 1st world pastimes such as a play production, the peak of track season, a violin recital and an AP test, all requiring time and effort. Because of this I feel as if, out of necessity, I missed the shock of coming back, or the slow re-entering into American society that so many people had described to me. I simply dove headfirst into the rush of day to day life again, and in retrospect I feel that in some ways this is wrong - shouldn't you painfully assimilate back into culture, shouldn't I be blown back by the petty drama of high school life or the consumerist culture that we all participate in? After giving this some thought I decided it wasn't such a bad thing because I didn't forget. I didn't forget the power and privilege we all possess just in that we can come to this church and have such a vibrant community, or the fortune to pick what foods I eat or the fact that I can choose what occupation fits my interests the most and run with it. And I have found that this remembrance is enough to keep myself grounded and that it pervades every decision I make for the better, whether it be buying organic fair trade products, whether it be knowing where I stand around issues and being comfortable enough to speak for a change, or whether it be changing myself into a happier and more loving person. Thanks Nicaragua, thanks Jessica and Sarah Woodard and Mom and Dad, and thanks to everyone here, for by just listening me talk about changing the world as I see fit, you have helped me to become a better person.