

'You know what it's like to be separated from a comrade'

El Salvador, 1980s

Canadian Karen Ridd is one of thousands of people who have gone unarmed into conflict zones to protect human rights workers with their presence. In 1989 Karen was working for one of these groups, Peace Brigades International (PBI), in El Salvador when she and Colombian colleague Marcela Rodriguez were arrested by the El Salvadoran National Guard.

Riding in the back of truck, the women overheard the soldiers describe them as 'terrorists from the Episcopal church'. At the army barracks they were blindfolded and subjected to five hours' interrogation about their alleged connection with the *guerrilla*. From nearby rooms they could hear the sounds of torture and victims sobbing.

Meanwhile the PBI team and their worldwide network of supporters contacted the Canadian and Colombian embassies, they urged their governments to contact the Salvadoran government and request Karen's and Marcela's release. The Colombian embassy did not respond but Canada brought official pressure on the Salvadoran government, hinting that its trade relations with El Salvador could be compromised if Karen were not released immediately. By the end of the day, Karen walked across the barrack's grounds without army escort, free and she was met by staff from the Canadian embassy.

Glad as she was to be alive, Karen felt terrible. Inside when the soldiers had removed her blindfold she had caught a glimpse of Marcela, face to the wall, 'a perfect picture of dehumanisation'. The Canadians could only negotiate the release of Karen. Marcela was to stay behind. Upon hearing that Marcela's release wasn't imminent, Karen felt something tug on her inside and she made an excuse to the embassy official about needing to go back, and Karen turned around and returned to the army barracks. She didn't know what would happen inside, but she knew she couldn't just walk out on her friend.

The soldiers were startled. They handcuffed her again. In the next room, a soldier banged Marcela's head into the wall and said that some 'white bitch' was stupid enough walk back in there, and 'Now you're going to see the treatment that a terrorist deserves'. But the soldiers continued to talk, and Karen explained in different words, and over and over 'You know what it's like to be separated from a comrade. You don't just leave your friend behind'. And this got through to the soldiers, and shortly they released both Karen and Marcela.

Extracted from Michael Nagler's book *The Search for a Nonviolent Future*

Diversity, Racism and Community meeting

USA, contemporary

150 participants ranging from the upper-middle class, to people forced to sleep rough had gathered in a central meeting area in a shopping centre in Los Angeles. They were taking part in a community forum about diversity, class and race in Los Angeles. The meeting forum was facilitated by a racially-mixed team of four people. On the first day there was a tense atmosphere, heated exchanges and arguments, and on the second day a similar number of participants gathered in the forum meeting area. I

Early on in the meeting this second day a white man in his 40s spoke gently and confidently about how much experience he had with multicultural groups, how happy he was to be there taking part in the meeting, and how important reasoned dialogue was and how damaging anger could be.

A black man in his 20s then stood up and quietly said that he didn't think the white man knew what he was talking about. The white man remained seated and did not reply. The black man stood up again, looked at the white man and spoke vehemently about not being heard. The white man then responded that he could not talk to such an 'angry person'. Then ensued a kind of back and forth. The African-American man becoming louder and angrier as he spoke about invisibility and injustice. The white man remained sitting, refusing to acknowledge the black man's comment with a response. He even turned in his seat away from the young black man and repeated his earlier message to the general audience that he believed in dialogue and sharing experiences, but that such conversations must be carried out with calm.

Finally at one point, a white member of the facilitation team intervened and pointed out that white man's aloof behaviour and turning away from the other speaker was based on his assumption that people needed to be calm when speaking. This assumption, the facilitator furthered, was based on the mainstream expectation born of exclusivity and privilege since calmness is only possible when the issue is not too troubling or upsetting.

This point was taken up by the group and debated in healthy and robust way, but no mutual understanding seemed to be emerging amongst those gathered. At this point a black member of the facilitation team intervened to explain what she perceived as a sort of hidden message in the white man's request for calm: 'Follow my rules and behave nicely, and don't upset me about issues that aren't really mine.' Adherence to social rules like this marginalises issues that on the surface may seem to be only of a concern to a minority.

Following this, the group seemed to come around to a loose mutual understanding about they had heard. At this point though a Latino member of the group stood up to speak about (and complain) that his community had conflicts with whites and blacks but their issues were always placed second place on the agenda ...

Extracted from Arnold Mindell's book *Sitting in the Fire: large group transformation using conflict and diversity*