

'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 a group called Peace Brigades International (PBI for short) 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, while the sounds of torture and sobbing of victims came from nearby rooms.

Meanwhile the PBI team and their worldwide network of supporters contacted the Canadian and Colombian embassies to urge them to contact the Salvadoran government and request Karen and Marcela's immediate release. The Colombian embassy did not respond but Canada brought official pressure on the Salvadoran government, perhaps even hinting at its extensive trade relations with El Salvador could be compromised if Karen were not released immediately. Whatever it was that got through to whomever in charge, by the end of the day, Karen walked a free woman across the barrack's grounds to meet her rescuer from the 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.

Something tugged inside Karen and making an excuse to the exasperated embassy official Karen turned around and walked back into the army barracks; she didn't know what would happen inside there, but knowing that she couldn't 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 to Karen who tried to explain: 'You know what it's like to be separated from a comrade.' That got to them. Shortly thereafter, they released both Karen and Marcela.

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 to take part in a community forum about diversity and race in Los Angeles. The meeting forum was being facilitated by a racially-mixed team of four (two black, two white women and men). Despite a tense atmosphere, heated exchanges and arguments on the first day, a similar number of participants showed up on the second day.

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

A black man in his 20s then stood up and quietly said 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 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 continued to refuse replying directly to the younger man, even turning in his seat, to face away from the man. He kept repeating to the general audience that he believed in dialogue and sharing experiences, but that such conversations must be carried out with calm.

Finally, 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.

At this point other group members began to join the conversation debating this point but seemingly still not coming to any sort of mutual understanding. Later a black member of the facilitation team explained 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.

At this point, the group seemed to come around to a loose mutual understanding and the meeting continued with a Latino member speaking up to complain that his community had conflicts with whites and blacks but their issues were always placed second place on the agenda ... and thus another issue was opened up for discussion.

Bear in a small cage

India, 1950s

Two men, friends, one called Amal and the other called Yash, were walking through a market and they came upon another man with a caged bear. The cage was so small the bear could hardly turn around. The friends walked away without speaking.

Later that day Amal and Yash met again and Amal had been crying his eyes out he was so upset about the bear's living conditions: 'I'm going to get my gun, go to the market and set the bear free, and I'll shoot anyone who tries to stop me'. Yash, said 'Wait a minute, hold on just a bit, let me see what I can do' and thus convinced his friend to put aside that idea for the moment.

Yash went to the market and found the bear's owner. It turned out they were from the same state of Kerala, and so it wasn't hard to broach the subject of the bear after chatting a while in their local language.

Yash asked the man, 'Look here, don't you think that the bear is suffering in such a small cage?'

'Do you think I like to keep him penned up like that?' the market man explained. 'But what can I do? A new cage would cost me more than a month's earnings.'

Yash then asked if the man would be willing to use a larger cage if he could get one, to which the market man readily agreed.

Next Yash went to see a carpenter, and by luck the man also turned out to be from Kerala. Yash explained the situation to the man and came right to the point: 'Can you build me a cage and give me a rock bottom price?' The carpenter hesitated, explained he had a family to feed, but with a bit more negotiating, finally agreed.

Yash then returned to to Amal and proposed that if they could get a better cage built for so-and-so amount of rupees would he pay it? Amal said yes, but doubted that the bear's owner would ever agree. Yash then revealed the whole story and that the resolution was already under way.

Dinner in Paris

France, contemporary

One summer while working on an archaeological site in Greece, Michael made the acquaintance of a French Baron and his wife. Michael and his wife were returning to the US via Paris once the summer work was done. The Baron invited them to his home for dinner.

The apartment was splendid, the meal wonderful and conversation engaging until the Baron casually remarked 'Oh, I completely believe in the inequality of the races'. This type of comment was something that under other circumstances would have spurred Michael into fury and cause him to jump on his soapbox and argue a counterpoint. But that day, the several factors held him back. One, the conversation was in French, which slowed down his response; and he felt uncomfortable responding with his normal level of rage in this man's home. So he held his tongue.

Some moments later, the conversation changed course and the Baron said 'You know, nothing in the world matters more than love'. To which Michael gently responded 'Do you think that the races are unequally endowed with the capacity to love?'

The Baron was stunned but pensive and replied 'what a most intriguing question'. The conversation then began to explore, race, love, family among other things. By the end of the evening, Michael felt a huge relief to have found a constructive response for his anger. While initially he had felt his conviction stifled by the circumstances, eventually the situation gave way to a stimulating and amicable discussion about race and love. Michael left that evening feeling that the conversation had done a bit to chipped away at the Baron's notions of racial superiority more than any lecture or angry reply he could have given.