Women Cultivate Power in Nicaragua
Our Radical Teachers

In Nicaragua, women cultivate power and share their wisdom with UU feminists from the United States. story and photos by Air Nonken

Our bellies were grumbling, unaccustomed to the breakfast of rice, salty beans, fresh tangerine juice, and strong coffee. Our little white bus trundled down the Managua city streets on our first full day in Nicaragua, past lots thick with bullhorn acacia, manchineel trees, and tall grasses filled with birds. Tiny businesses and corrugated tin homes sat in orderly rows along deep cement gutters hinting at preparation for torrential rains.

"I am overcome with emotions of excitement and despair," reflected Lily, from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on that first day — her first time seeing global poverty in person. "I am embarking on this beautiful journey, but is the lesson beautiful?"

I was traveling with a dozen women from North America, including nine from South Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on an experiential learning trip organized by the UU College of Social Justice (UUCSJ). Our program leaders, Gina Collignon and Marissa Gutierrez-Vicario, encouraged us to be silent as we first drove through Managua, so that we could be fully present with ourselves and our emotions. We were farmers and social workers and retirees; a high school student, mothers, and septuagenarians; white, black, Latina, Filipina, and more; straight and queer; wealthy and not. We traveled as a cohort of women and female-bodied people to learn about women farmers, their feminist vision, and their grassroots organizing movements, to find inspiration for our justice work at home and abroad. (To protect their identities, I use first names only for most of the organizers we met and refer to Americans and Nicaraguans alike by first name on second reference.)

Operated collaboratively by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the UU Service Committee, the college exists not to grant degrees but "to inspire and sustain effective and spiritually grounded activism for justice." We'd done all we could digitally to prepare. Guided by an extensive UUCSJ study guide, we had spent months reading articles and books, watching videos, and talking in study groups about the history, political context, social justice grounding, and spiritual implications of the injustices Nicaraguan women had organized themselves to confront. Bundled up against the fall and winter chill, the South Church members had gathered in person in Portsmouth, grappling with...
the disturbing pattern of U.S. interventions in Nicaragua and with feminist theories of fair trade. On phones and laptops from our cars and homes we had conferenced together to hear travel tips, navigating spotty microphones and seeing in tiny slices the lives from which we would be venturing forth.

I had patched my summer pants while we talked and wondered, “Should I bring protein bars to supplement the meals? How short can shorts be to not offend? How can we hold up the ideal of the democratic process when our great democracy had perpetrated such oppressions on the Nicaraguan people? How can we take care of ourselves when we encounter something too hard to handle in the moment?”

The Rev. Kathleen McTigue, UUCSJ’s director, knows firsthand the transformative experience of crossing boundaries. While volunteering in Nicaragua with Witness for Peace in 1983–1984, she had encountered some of the women whom we would meet, and she remains connected to and inspired by their fight for justice to this day.

Through Gina, Marissa, and Kathleen’s guidance we came to the trip ready to ask better questions and listen with informed ears and hearts. But it was still essential to take that further step into the lived communities of those from whom we were learning, to be present with the women themselves.

“To inspire and sustain faith-based activism, we have to understand elements of injustice way down to the bone, not just on the thinking level. Immersion learning takes us to a part of our reality that we haven’t known before,” Kathleen explained. “The kind of learning that changes lives, rattles your soul, blows your mind in some way, comes from a direct encounter with a person, or a place, outside of our usual comfort zone.”

To engage in this type of learning in a place as far away as Nicaragua is a privilege. This trip was not a typical church mission trip, where the purpose is to give labor, goods, knowledge, or salvation to recipients of charity. “There’s a distinctly UU way of thinking about mission that isn’t about conversion but is about the questions, ‘Who are we? Who are we capable of serving now? How might we expand our capacity to serve?’” said the Rev. Lauren Smith, South Church’s co-minister, who participated in the trip. “It’s distinctly UU because we’re going out into the world to learn and be altered rather than to alter. We are going out to be converted.”

South Church, the congregation from which most of my fellow travelers came, stands in the center of Portsmouth. The congregation just celebrated its 300th anniversary and is blossoming in transition: the church has experienced 50 percent growth in the last six years and bustles with multigenerational families. Last year, adults from South Church went on UUCSJ’s first trip focused on Fundación Entre Mujeres (FEM, Foundation Between Women) and came back from Nicaragua with social justice passion, spiritual grappling, and community relationships that laid the groundwork for our trip.

Why did we travel to Nicaragua, specifically? Because through Kathleen’s previous work there, our community had relationships on which we could build an authentic experience. Our in-country host, Sharcie Hostetler, an American who has made Nicaragua her home since the 1970s, and our translator, Julieta Martinez, also knew many of the organizers and farmers we met from years of activism with Witness for Peace. And we traveled here because the realities of life and feminism and cultivating coffee in Nicaragua have important and difficult ties to our lives in the United States.

We traveled for seven days in January 2018, arriving from some of the coldest days of winter into the sun and drought of Nicaragua. In Managua we met with historians, sociologists, economists, and feminist organizers in what felt like college lectures, grounding our understanding. Our bus then took us north into the small city of Esteli, from which we visited farmers and organizers in the rural communities of El Regadío and El Colorado. From there we went further north into the mountains, our bus bumping along seemingly impassable dirt roads to bring us to the tiny community of Los Llanos, where we picked and sorted coffee beans, exchanged poems, and danced. The trip back south to the airport at the end of the trip seemed unimaginably long. How had we traveled all this way? How had this landscape and these people been so unfamiliar to us when we first passed through such a short time ago?

Let me tell you about a moment my heart broke. We had been speaking with Yamileth Pérez, a smart, warm, determined community organizer in Acathalucina, her neighborhood in Managua. Rather than sit in the beautiful courtyard at Esperanza en Acción (Hope in Action), the organization she leads, Yamileth took us out of our comfort zone and into her neighborhood. She boarded our bus and directed our driver to turn here, pause, lock here. We needed instruction, because we didn’t know where to look, where not to look, fascinated and horrified by the human devastation. Acathalucina is a neighborhood of trash pick-
ers, and—with the ironies that global capitalism is so adept at creating—they are under-employed. Most have been locked out of the main dump (their home and livelihood for generations), which was privatized in the name of safety and efficiency.

If you have had the privilege to never experience life in a community where trash is a valued source of income, let me describe the scene. The trash heap in the main dump rises like a low mountain, unignorably present. Foothills of trash line the streets and ditches and front yards. Scraps of faded plastic and shredded leaves eddy in the wind. It smells strongly, as you'd expect, of rancid food and burning plastic and fetid mold and the cloaking stench of diseased human feces. There is a bustle to the scene, as people of all ages sort piles, shovel piles, cart piles, burn piles, add to piles: springy metal, rusted metal, soft things, blue plastic, oh God, I hope that's not food. Dogs, donkeys, goats, and doves scavenge throughout.

Yamileth says that, thanks to women's organizing, what we see is largely an improvement over the conditions when she was growing up here. She holds a ream of sun-bleached photos that she had taken to show what it used to be like: Vultures hunching over naked children like parodies of nursemaids. A scrum of human bodies milling around a dump truck as it upends the scraps of animals from a slaughterhouse. Human hands pawing with purpose through the slime. Yamileth shares a recipe for hiding the taste of decay in meat: salt, liquor, and as much lime juice as you can find.

Looking out the windows at the industry of waste and at these snapshots of the past brings to mind scenes of hell—not hyperbolically, but actual paintings of the torment medieval Europeans like Hieronymus Bosch thought awaited sinners when they died. But I am looking at this life, the same plane of existence where you sit with your phone or at your computer or with this magazine in your hand. Acahualinca is a few hours away. Its residents have done nothing to deserve this hardship, this indignity.

But this community is lucky. They have Yamileth. I have lived and worked with inspiring refugees and religious leaders in Cambodia, Thailand, India, Costa Rica, Australia, and the United States, but I have rarely met a more powerful and effective community organizer. As we sat in her home and she spoke to us about organizing, a woman
stopped by to ask her about installing a speed bump on her street. A boy waited patiently for a small loan. A medical kit sat ready for any neighbors who needed infectious diseases diagnosed. A soccer ball waited for the boys' afternoon practice. Yamileth held a relative's toddler while she described policy failures. She kept an eye through the open walls on everyone passing by. A small sign near her door read that this was a place where a person could receive care.

She is not an effective community leader despite being a mother and grandmother, despite running dozens of seemingly unrelated projects, despite not having much formal education and being from and still living in this incredibly under-resourced community. She is an effective community leader because of these connections.

"We have each been placed here for a reason," mused Yamileth. "God has given us a purpose. The phrase I repeat to myself is, If I do not live to serve, it does not serve to live."

We arrived too early at the brick home of Gloria and Augusto in El Regadio. Sharon, who has known Gloria and Augusto for more than twenty years, greeted them with laughs and hugs at the door while the rest of us took in the corrugated tin roof, the beautiful flowers, the upended plastic soda bottles forming a colorful garden border, the swept pathway, the cats and dogs wandering about.

After chiding us about arriving early, Gloria and Augusto led us inside and rearranged the furniture to seat us all. Pictures of relatives, revolutionaries, and saints covered the walls. Gloria popped in and out of the kitchen, cooking us a snack while correcting Augusto's stories. After a few minutes, their daughter strode through the room on her way from the shower, blushing and waving, wrapped in a towel. El Regadio (The Irrigation), named for its lush streams, now—thanks to climate change—has only enough water to run through their pipes for 30 minutes in the morning and 30 more at night. We had arrived during the morning washing time. When I asked them what their dream for their future was, Gloria said without hesitation, "To have a well so that we can have water in our homes all day long."

When our ranks swelled with friends from El Regadio's farmer's cooperative, we shifted next door to the community center, where we sat in a circle while the wind blew, and listened to the farmers (mostly women) share their stories.

Let me tell you about the wind. It blew every-
where we went. It interrupted the voices of the
women who were telling us about their wells, about
the laws that conspired against their bodies, about
their power. It lifted the edges of the tin roof up
forcefully and slammed it back down again on the
edges of the mud brick walls. It blew strongest at
night. Unable to stop the wind, and this being our
only time together, we talked above the wind, paus-
ing sometimes for the roof or door or banana palm
to slam, or we talked and listened despite the ruck-
us, despite the unlikelihood of being fully heard.

The women spoke to us in Spanish, and most in
our group were stuck behind the translucent wall of
our monolingualism. Julieta, our patient translator,
bridged our words from world to world, using her
own life with one foot in Nicaragua and one foot
in the United States to carry words back and forth
between the Nicaraguan feminist farmers and the
Unitarian Universalist women from the North.

The trust they showed in opening their pasts and
their hearts to us, total strangers, was in itself a life
lesson. Having grown up in a machista patriarchal
culture, these women shoulder enormous burdens
of poverty and work. Gloria, the sixth of twelve
children, described growing up without education,
without food, and without safety because of the
Somoza dictatorship. She came of age as a young
mother during the Sandinista Revolution; she and
many other women joined the men teaching and
fighting to overthrow Anastasio Somoza Debayle,
whose family had ruled the country for three gen-
erations. “It was like this crazy love,” Gloria said,
“and looking back on it now, I wonder, how were we
able to do so much?” Struggling side by side in the
jungles and towns and city streets, they advanced
not only their country’s political autonomy, but
also women’s struggle for equality. Augusto, in
his white Stetson and tidy button-down shirt, and
Gloria, who reminds me of every kind auntie I
knew from childhood church socials in Connecticut,
aren’t who I’d have pictured as radical femi-
nist organizers. They moved many of us to tears,
though, through their dogged work with their
neighbors to better all of their lives, and through
their insight into how their lives are tied to what
they referred to as the “international neoliberal
capitalist system.”

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the
Western Hemisphere. The majority of Nicara-
guans live on less than US$2 a day. A shift in the
weather, a twisted ankle, a lost piece of paper can
mean the difference between making it and disas-
ter. The government provides free basic-service
health clinics and mandates twelve weeks of paid
maternity leave, but most people lack water access and protection from domestic violence. Through organizing with their neighbors, Augusto and Gloria are doing a bit better than most but still don’t have a lifestyle that reflects the amount of hard work they put in every day.

There’s a history to their circumstances, and it’s a history in which the United States—and you and I—are complicit. Marines fully occupied Nicaragua from 1912 to 1933. For decades after, U.S. government actors had a strong hand in choosing (often through violence) the political leaders who ruled Nicaragua in waves of varying oppressions. When the Nicaraguan people rebelled from the 1960s to the 1990s and elected socialists, the United States backed their enemies and undermined (literally, with mines) their economic and military options.

Politicians elected by us and our parents, and the military and paramilitary forces they supported, have had an outsized and disastrous impact on the daily human reality of generations of Nicaraguans. And yet these Nicaraguans welcomed us into their homes. “Our problem isn’t with the people of the United States,” clarified Augusto. “It’s with the government of the United States. Tell the people of the United States, and the government, that the people of Nicaragua love peace. We don’t want conflict. And we don’t want need intervention. We are self-organized here and are organized well.”

While wandering up the hill across fields and through barbed wire fences to see their unfinished cistern, Gloria and Augusto commiserated with us about the challenges of organizing: there’s never enough time, it’s always the same small group of people who are tapped to run all the committees and projects, it’s hard to rustle up the money to do something for your community. We shared the ways climate change is affecting our hometowns. We chuckled over the similarities in the experiences of organizing, regardless of topic or culture. We all get so tired.

“It’s being organized that keeps us going,” shared Graciella, Gloria’s friend. “Alone, we’re invisible. If we’re organized, when we’re together, we’re visible—in the community, in this country, internationally. We dance and sing, we sell our goods together at fairs, and we continue to move forward together.”

Gloria taught us how in El Regadio, whenever energy is needed among women, someone shouts out, “¿Donde estan las mujeres? (Where are the women?)” and all the women around proudly shout, fists raised, “¡Aquí! (Here!)” We never got tired of shouting this the rest of the week.

Simply being together cemented the human connections we were building. We played complex patty-cake games with the kids and laughed when we adults got totally caught up in it. Everyone’s favorite moment: when a bird flew up and goosed Janis in the latrine, to the great laughter of all (Janis included). We convinced Gloria to let some of us wash the lunch dishes while she sat in the garden, talking about her great new stucco oven. Augusto told a hilarious story of the time he got stuck in a snowstorm in Oregon.

This was why we were here. “Social change doesn’t come from words, or even discourse,” Augusto said. “It can only come from action, and in relationships.” And even though we may never speak again, we left that day with lifelong friends whose home and lives and experiences will always be a part of how we see the world and how we choose to move through it.

As a minister, I say all the time, I’m not the source, the Sources are the source,” Lauren shared before the trip. “We have source traditions, including the words and deeds of prophetic [people]. They’re like sacred texts. In order to be in ministry and spiritual life in a sustained way, I have to look to my sacred texts for wisdom, inspiration, solace, strength. In this trip I’m looking forward to a new way to connect to the sources of that.”

Most of the people we visited were organized through FEM, a nonprofit social movement centered around Esteli in north central Nicaragua. Most FEM leaders we met are in their 70s, which in Nicaragua is very old. These are tiny women, maybe four feet eight, muscular and weathered from a lifetime of work in the sun. Each has a fire of justice burning within her that seems almost dangerous. They have been working together for longer than I have been alive. They touch one another’s shoulders and waists with ease, and listen intently to one another’s stories, even though they know them as well as their own. Their daughters work alongside them. They carry their granddaughters on their hips.

FEM’s work is decentralized. Their model is based on empowerment rather than providing services, so the people doing the work are themselves the beneficiaries. This made learning from them inseparable from learning the realities of the lives they are changing. They spoke candidly with us about their farms, their daughters, their histories of rape, their anger.

They see the same issues in each village. Women still have unequal access to land, a lack of decision-making in their homes, and high levels of illit-
eracy; they aren’t able to make decisions about their bodies or sex, and are frequently victims of violence. The government, despite its socialist and more egalitarian early years, now persecutes, sues, and blacklists feminists. Domestic violence shelters are closing down. Law 779, which was intended to reduce domestic violence by holding men accountable, has indeed reduced beatings, but the number of murdered women has increased sharply. A local woman was missing when we stayed in one small community and was later found murdered and thrown in a well.

Like Yamileth, Gloria, and Augusto, the women of FEM organize. Home by home, they support each woman’s “ideological empowerment,” teaching self-respect, economic independence, and organizational empowerment — since you can’t do anything sustainable alone. FEM’s version of empowerment is inherently tied to the land, and to other women.

“We are organized women who have come out of the dark corners of our homes. We were in dark corners because we had women’s genitals and a woman’s name,” one leader said. “Then FEM came into our community, and we could come out of that dark corner, and we could see that we could do more. We could see that we could take care of Mother Earth. We could see that we were farmers, in the way we did before even Jesus existed. As women we could plant a seed.”

Very early, the sun just rising, the bus strained its way up into the mountains.

Sharon smiled at us as we crowded the bus windows to gaze at one of the most beautiful landscapes I’ve ever seen, green patchwork fields blanketing steep valleys, craggy volcanic ridges rising into clouds. We grinned with delight as the views just kept getting better. Eventually the bus dropped us off at the edge of the road in El Colorado, and we walked along dirt paths deeper into the jungle to meet the women of CopaMujer (Co-Op, or Cup, of Women), a women’s coffee co-op. Huge trees towered above us, air plants in their canopies, underbrush I know as houseplants growing wild all around.

We gathered at a FEM member’s home that was to me like paradise. Long tables ran along an open porch overlooking tumbled flower and vegetable gardens and a stunning green valley to the mountains beyond. Chickens and dogs and kids ran about. Handsome young men arrived on the backs of small horses. Already tired-looking women walked up the hill with empty baskets on their heads. Everyone knew each other so well that greetings were unnecessary.

They have so much of what I am trying to create in my own life — quiet and nature and community and self-sufficiency and meaningful work and time to spend with family — and I have some of what they strive for, especially money and opportunity and choice and protection by some laws. I wondered whether these things are mutually exclusive. What would I be willing to give up to have the riches that they hold? What would I give up to increase equity and advance their access to justice?

Then we walked further into the jungle, each given a basket to tote around our waist, each paired with someone who actually knew what they were doing. The slopes were slick with fallen leaves and berries. They assured us that there were only a few snakes about. Our eyes slowly sorted out what was at first incomprehensible greenery: this was a farm, not a wild mountain, and those tall bushes, there amid the banana trees and orchids, were covered in coffee berries.

When we think of coffee, we might think of a treat, a ritual, energy, fellowship. In Nicaragua it is all these things: some of the best moments of the week involved tiny, delicious, strong cups of the freshest coffee. But in Nicaragua coffee also means backbreaking work, money or its lack, and oppression or liberation.

Coffee is the most important agricultural product in Nicaragua today, representing 20 to 30 percent of its GDP. As a crop, coffee is a family production, linked to women’s decisions and labor. It is seasonal, labor-intensive, and relies heavily on natural resources, especially water.

“The capitalist model runs off of exploiting anything — land, bodies, minds, communities — which only deepens the inequalities that exist,” one founder of FEM explained. “We are creating an agroecological feminist farmer model that places life at the center. Practically speaking, through this farming we are embracing our ancestral wisdom, recovering our bodies and our territory. We are all women working for the emancipation of all women.”

We spent the morning harvesting coffee. Each berry is picked by hand, delicately so as not to break its fragile stem, but swiftly because money is at stake. Our feet slid around on the damp brushy slope, and it was hard not to grab onto the precious coffee bushes to break our falls. Miniscule ants swarmed over any rotten berry, smearing on our hands, and a fresh musk soon rose from our work. The baskets at our waists quickly grew heavy.

This grove of coffee needed harvesting whether
or not we were there, so our hosts were glad to have extra hands for the day, in part as we were at first. When we didn’t share language in common, we spoke with hands and eyes. My partner was stern and direct, placing her hand on mine as one would on a child’s when I reached for something I shouldn’t. She nodded brusquely when I looked for confirmation. The women teased each other up and down the slope, and it was easy to see how their lives depended on one another. Not one of their fields could be harvested alone, but working as a unified group, their crops became possible.

“It was incredibly powerful,” Lauren reflects.

“We had spent many hours listening to a variety of speakers talk about the political history of Nicaragua, the economic realities of campesinas [rural farms], the exquisite organizing taken up by Nicaraguan women. We learned so much, and it was all present with me in the simple act of picking berries on a hillside.”

When we had a language bridge available, we chatted with the farmers about how they were working to gain legal ownership of their own fields, about their organic permaculture practices and how they’re similar to ours in the Northeast, about how climate change is devastating their crops. They bemoaned the gap between what they make as producers and what coffee sells for, how that dynamic is present in all global capitalism and affects the value of all workers below the 1 percent. We talked about who was the fastest picker, what a catch one young woman’s husband was since he was a feminist, how short the growing season was back home in New England. And then of course it was time for a coffee break. Someone had brought a carafe and tiny plastic mugs up onto the mountainside. We stood around with fern trees in our faces, our hands sticky with coffee berries and squashed ants, faces tired, sipping and laughing and comparing our hauls, knowing that we did this for a few hours, and that our new friends would do this again and again.

Over the next few days we followed the coffee beans through the next stages of their journey, picking our green from red in a frenzy of fast fingers, hauling a heavy crank on a grinder to strip the beans from their berry shells, carting them to another town where women washed the berry slime from the beans in precious water and laid them out to dry. So much labor, so many people, so much water and time and meticulous effort go into every single bean.

Laurie says that when she has a cup of coffee now, she thinks of “the hands and legs and backs and faces and hearts of a lot of beautiful and tired and determined women trying to protect and better themselves and their families by organizing and producing this product in ways that feed, rather than diminish, the planet.”

Imagine if every UU congregation, every committee, every family drinking a cup in the United States had met the farmers who grew their coffee. I know that now I will always reach for fair-trade products: How can I not, knowing the pride and enormous stake our new friends and hundreds of thousands of other people around the world have in these delicate trees?

A

fter counting off and boarding our bus for a journey away from Esteli, for once we were not gazing at the views. Prompted by the Third Principle, Marissa and Gina had asked us at breakfast, “What is spiritual growth?” and we couldn’t let the question go. It seemed so hard to answer so far outside our familiar contexts. We shared tender pieces of our life stories that seemed related to the growth of our souls: the loss of a friendship, leaving an abusive situation, learning something truly new, realizing our own culpability, making glorious music together. “Truth and meaning require active seeking. They aren’t received,” one said.

“IT seems important that you’re all here, that we’re all together, asking this question,” said another, pointing out the window at a vast dry field with a small factory on one edge, a horse trotting by. “It’s uncomfortable. Spiritual growing pains.”

After quite some time, our answers formed a mosaic. Spiritual growth is asking hard questions; not being complacent; challenging ourselves to align our lives with our values; being human with other humans; actively connecting with what is divine; and doing so in community, with others to support us as we are in the hard place of questioning, making sure we get out of our own heads and into the human and outside world.

I’ve traveled and lived abroad most of my adult life. Grounded in my UU upbringing, I’ve wrestled with questions of principles and oppression and justice, but most often without a community present. To be in a place where these issues were unignorable, and to be there with people who shared my values and were actively engaged in contemplative conversation, filled my spiritual well in a way that will sustain my questioning for years to come.

And then we had to go home. We stocked up on souvenirs and complained about price gouging, tried to find a healthier breakfast, and checked
the forecasts of snow. We began retreating into our more typical selves. We weren’t all on the same flight, so in groups we started to give hugs and say goodbye, already feeling the distances between tendril new friends.

So what did this trip accomplish? “I don’t know yet how the trip has changed me,” shared Lauren. “I know it affirms the impetus to put at the center what has been at the margins.” Coffee has new meaning to many of us. We are more aware of the real ramifications of everything from ICE raids to fair trade and organic standards to military interventionist policies. We are speaking up in our families and communities and with our representatives. Some of us are learning Spanish. Some are contemplating running for office. We feel less complacent, more conscious, and more involved in justice, each in our own way.

“We have to be willing to change ourselves, not just change the world,” Kathleen explained. “By being human, we are always part of the problem, always. We have to be able to see that it is a constant mutual process of changing ourselves and being more humble, while we work to change the world.”

I find myself dwelling increasingly on ideas of global redistributions of wealth and the Sixth Principle. I recall the faces of Gloria, Yamileth, Isabel, and their strong work against the injustices the world presses on them. I ask myself if the step I contemplate is going to be of any use to them. Will they gain anything by it? Will it restore control over any of their own lives and destinies? Will it lead to their freedom?

Having met these amazing women, having spent time in their homes and with their families, now caring for them and better understanding their lives, we all wondered, what can we do? We asked them, in each town and each group, “What should we bring back with us? What change do you hope can come of our time with you?”

“I’m so glad you’re here to learn with us,” said Gloria, smiling. “You’re going to go back and take these seeds, and they will germinate and spread, and they will bear unknown but positive fruits. As long as we don’t understand each other and each other’s history, we won’t be well.”

They told us that sitting down to hear their stories honored their dignity and raised their struggles and successes beyond themselves. By carrying their stories with us in our hearts and minds, the justice-working women of Nicaragua can be organized on a greater scale; they know they have the strength of the whole community of feminists with them. So we tell people about them. “I vow to tell the accomplishments of these women wherever I go. To let it be known now is the time to rise in community and change for the better,” shared Lily.

As I write this we haven’t been home two months, and our experiences are still reshaping us. Laurie said, “There are these words that keep popping up: guerra, muerte, escuelas, contras, triunfo, paz, sueño, sano, semillas, biointensivo, machismo, lucha, 779, organizada, mujeres, compañeras. So much to let settle, to let incubate, to seed, to grow, and to harvest in ways that, for the moment, I need to allow to be unknown, but to hold tenderly.”

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