

WITNESS TO FORCED MIGRATION: The Paradox of Resiliency

Mark Lusk & Georgina Sanchez Garcia



This report was researched and written by Mark Lusk & Georgina Sanchez.

The **Hope Border Institute** (HOPE) brings the perspective of Catholic social teaching to bear on the realities unique to our US-Mexico border region. Through a robust program of research and policy work, leadership development and action, we work to build justice and deepen solidarity across the borderlands.

Border Observatory. *Witness to Forced Migration: The Paradox of Resiliency*
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Witness to Forced Migration: The Paradox of Resiliency

Mark Lusk & Georgina Sanchez Garcia

“Sueñan las pulgas con comprarse un perro y sueñan los nadies con salir de pobres, que algún mágico día llueva de pronto la buena suerte, que llueva a cántaros la buena suerte; pero la buena suerte no llueve ayer, ni hoy, ni mañana, ni nunca, ni en llovizna cae del cielo la buena suerte, por mucho que los nadies la llamen y aunque les pique la mano izquierda, o se levanten con el pie derecho, o empiecen el año cambiando de escoba.

Los nadies: los hijos de nadie, los dueños de nada. Los nadies: los ningunos, los ninguneados, corriendo la liebre, muriendo la vida, jodidos, rejodidos.”

Eduardo Galeano. *Los nadies, El libro de los abrazos*. 1989, Madrid : Siglo XXI Editores.

Those who migrate at the point of a gun, or under threat of extortion, injury, abduction, hunger, or any of a myriad of other brutal reasons, are too often invisible, unheard, ignored, forgotten, or worse yet, imprisoned and deported without due process. They are much like *los nadies* (the nobodies) of Eduardo Galeano’s poem.

We counter this invisibility by witnessing their experiences and are compelled by conscience to shine a light into the anonymity of their perilous experience. A witness can and must, as El Paso human rights worker Ruben Garcia says, “give voice to the voiceless.”

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PREFACE

This important work by Dr. Mark Lusk and Georgina Sanchez highlights the drivers of forced migration as well as the reserves of strength and resiliency that those forced to flee lean on during their journey. Their research is based on interviews with hundreds of migrants over the past decade.

This report demonstrates the paradox of resiliency--the experience of holding fast to family, faith and inner strength in the face of adversity. It is a critical reminder that the experience of forced migration should not be pathologized or seen merely as an experience of victimization. While there is often suffering behind the decision to flee, trauma need not be the end of the story.

Broken immigration policy treats people as expendable, dangerous and unworthy of dignity. The stories told

here provide an intimate window into the root causes of poverty, violence, instability and exploitation that continue to force people out of Central America and Mexico. More importantly, they reveal the humanity behind each person's experience of migration.

I am most grateful to Dr. Lusk for his support of the Hope Border Institute as a founding trustee and for his inspiring lifetime dedication to witnessing the stories of those forced to the margins and the hope which they inspire, so crucial for the construction of a world on more just foundations.

Dylan Corbett
Executive Director, Hope Border Institute

BACKGROUND

The migrant trail of tears is drawing increasing global attention as refugees and forced migrants have fled Syria, Venezuela, South Sudan, Myanmar, Somalia, Afghanistan, Honduras and other conflict states. Of the 272 million international migrants worldwide, 26 million are refugees, 46 million are forcibly displaced people, and 4.2 million are seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2021; International Organization for Migration, 2020). Untold numbers of migrants have fled their homes as a result of natural disaster, civil war, organized crime, and starvation caused by climate change and land displacement.

For generations, millions of people from Mexico and Central America have migrated to the United States on a seasonal or permanent basis in search of labor and economic opportunity. Beyond economic migration, there has been an increasing flow of families and individuals who migrate in search of asylum on grounds of persecution and to escape serious crime such as homicide, kidnapping, extortion, trafficking, and forced conscription into gangs. Mexicans increasingly migrate to the United States due to the lack of physical security from over a decade of drug-related warfare and the spread of organized crime (Slack, 2019).

In addition, the migration of people to the US from the northernmost countries of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador) has grown significantly as governments in the region are unable to control

organized crime or provide public safety, forcing people to flee drug trafficking, public corruption, gang violence and widespread crime (O'Connor, Batalova & Bolter, 2019). Since the Sanctuary Movement of the early 1980s, when American churches and social justice organizations became a refuge for Central Americans fleeing ethnic genocide and the dirty wars of right-wing dictatorships, the United States has witnessed the migration of hundreds of thousands of Central Americans. Over the past five years, on average 265,000 people each year have left the northernmost countries of Central America for the United States (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Recently, Central America has become the leading source of unauthorized migration to the US. Over 600,000 migrants from the Northern Triangle were apprehended at the US Mexican border in 2019 (Congressional Research Service, 2020). According to Customs and Border Protection data, there were 547,816 apprehensions at the southern border between January 2020 and December 2020 (Joffe-Block, 2021). With the election of the Biden administration and the perception that US immigration policy is becoming more open, caravans of migrants from the region have assembled and are enroute (Semple & Wirtz, 2021). In addition, the hurricanes and changing climate, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated political instability and a grim economy, leading to further out-migration (Corson & Hallock, 2021).

ENGAGING THE MIGRANT

It is forced migrants from Mexico and Central America who are the focus of our work. Those who had no choice. Those for whom the option of staying had become unbearable or unthinkable.

For over a decade we have been encountering the migrant in differing roles; as researcher and scholar and as volunteer, companion, advocate, and witness. In El Paso, Ciudad Juárez, and more recently in Tapachula, Chiapas, we have encountered hundreds of migrants who were fleeing their countries to escape torture, abduction, assault, sexual violence, famine, extreme poverty, criminal victimization, and forced conscription into organized crime. We met many as part of a formal interview process carried out under research grants and protocols, but we also met many more as volunteers in temporary shelters set up by parishes and non-profits during periods of exodus that brought people to the US-Mexico border. Others we spoke with in their residences, shelters, agencies that serve migrants, and detention centers. Attending to immediate needs such as contacting families, arranging transportation, and connecting to resources was always paramount, but countless opportunities emerged to engage in wide-ranging conversations where migrants shared their *testimonios*. They recounted oral histories of their lives in their country of origin, stories of their journeys to El Norte, and for those who were able to cross, they narrated their experiences on the northern side of el Rio Bravo. The purpose of these conversations was to witness their lived experience of migration as pilgrims on a path towards the hope for safety, freedom, security, employment, and reunification with family. Our goal has been to understand their migration experience and how they illuminate the meaning behind moving from one place to another.

Every story was unique. Each person had their own reasons for making the perilous journey, knowing full well what risks they were taking to reach their goal. Contrary to the vile narrative of xenophobes, nativists, and racists who paint false images of migrants based on a curtailed vision of humanity, nation and the experience of human movement, the picture we saw was consistently one of enormous courage, selfless devotion to children and family, and a desire to reach a place where they could be safe. The stories were filled with hope, sacrifice, faith and tenacity. They were also narratives of suffering, hardship, loss, grief and injustice. Although every personal account was distinctive, common themes emerged that connected their experiences. While we have written for the academic community, our more important goal has been to share their experiences with wider audiences at schools, churches, civic organizations, citizen's groups, and anyone willing to listen. There are too few opportunities for forced migrants to emerge from the shadows of draconian immigration enforcement and give voice to their lived reality. It is in that spirit that we present this summary, to allow you the reader to hear from them in their own words.

Our work was informed by three perspectives: the Latin American *testimonio* tradition, the work of *concientización*, and *accompaniment*. We also examined the migration experience through the lens of *social suffering*. The *testimonio* is based on oral histories passed on through generations to convey personal and family histories that frame important life events and passages. A *testimonio* serves to give voice to the voiceless and meaning to the powerless. It is a narrative of authentic lived experience from the perspective of the story teller. It may also serve to 'witness' powerful events such as a famine, plague, war

or migration. It may document a calamity, denounce an injustice or be a call for action (Gugelberger & Kearney, 1991; Yúdice, 1992). Examples include Rigoberta Menchu's chronicle of the experience of an indigenous Guatemalan woman and her people under the oppression of the right-wing military (Menchu, 1984). Similar testimonios of Latin American women include *Hear my Testimony: Maria Teresa Tula, Human Rights Activist of El Salvador* (Tula, 1994) and "*Si me Permiten Hablar:*" *Testimonio de Domitila, Una Mujer de las Minas de Bolivia* (Viezzler, 1991; Logan, 1997).

A testimonio may be an act of *concientización* where the narrative is designed to raise social awareness - what Paulo Freire refers to as a method of raising political consciousness through writing and social action or *praxis* (Freire, 1967; Yúdice, 1992). Migrants with whom we spoke frequently asked us to recount their stories to others and to be messengers so people would know what they had been through. They wanted to be seen and heard so that no one would have to experience what they had. An awareness of their suffering might penetrate the conscience of the listener and enlighten others about forced migration.

Social suffering is what political, economic and institutional power can do to people (Kleinman, Das & Locke, 1997). It is structural insofar as those who experience it differentially are the most vulnerable and their suffering is discounted and minimized, not unlike the ongoing femicides in Juárez that are largely ignored by virtue of

the socially invisible status of its victims (Pineda-Madrid, 2011). And so it is with migrants, who are ascribed lesser significance and are denigrated as "illegals" who stand outside of the bounds of the fair treatment expected by those with social status.

Accompaniment is "the intentional practice of presence (that) emphasizes processes and relationships over outcomes, with the ultimate goal of leveraging privilege and collectively changing destructive systems" (Wilkinson & D'Angelo, 2019). Standing alongside the migrant, being a witness to their oppression and being fully present with them in a mutual relationship can be a powerful and radical way of knowing them and acting on that knowledge (Lusk & Corbett, 2020; Wilkinson & D'Angelo, 2019). Paul Farmer describes accompaniment as "I'll go with you and support you on your journey...I'll share your fate for a while" (Farmer, 2013). It is a process of being a companion on a shared pilgrimage to justice based on deep listening that empowers both partners (Lusk & Corbett, 2020).

In many cases, migrants told us that this was the first time they had told their story and been heard. It was as if a burden was being lifted. Many cried and sobbed as if the pain and loss had cracked them open.



Migrant camps in the streets of Ciudad Juárez.

THE PARADOX OF RESILIENCE

We expect to encounter people who have suffered in our work, especially those who are leaving nations and regions plagued by drug wars, state corruption and massive insecurity. And though migrants recounted the trauma of the journey, they also told us about their hopes and dreams and how they were buoyed throughout by faith, family and strength.

Themes emerged. With rare exception, migrants said they were hopeful. Although they felt sad about leaving, they did not feel that they were victims. On the contrary, they framed their journey as an act of will, one aimed at saving themselves and their children. Repeatedly, they spoke of the willingness to sacrifice anything for their children. Many displayed the signs and symptoms of

post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. Yet, paradoxically, they described themselves as having high quality of life, positive personal well-being, resilience and deep faith (Lusk & Chavez-Baray, 2017; Lusk, 2014; Lusk & McCallister, 2015; Lusk, McCallister & Villalobos, 2013; Terrazas & Lusk 2020; Lusk, Terrazas, Caro, Chaparro & Puga, 2019; Lusk & Chaparro, 2019; Lusk & Villalobos, 2012; Torres & Lusk, 2018). They also felt they were being protected and had a feeling of internal strength and courage that would see them through (Lusk & Villalobos, 2012; Terrazas & Lusk, 2020). This seeming contradiction of significant suffering and trauma coexisting simultaneously with personal well-being, faith and fortitude is a *paradox of resiliency*.

SUFFERING, TRAUMA AND MIGRATION

A universal element of forced migration is that it is associated with trauma and suffering. It is rare to meet a forced migrant who did not undergo an ordeal. Everyone, even the few with resources, faced intense hardship. Notwithstanding, most did not dwell on the suffering or opt to frame their experience as a victim. In over five consecutive series of research surveys with forced migrants, we documented their adversity through the lens of trauma and found that most experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, yet they did not present as people who were defined by pathology. In time, in both formal interviews and informal conversations, we began to see that a better way to understand their experiences was through deep listening and a focus on resilience.

Suffering cannot be defined solely in psychological frameworks. It is also existential, having to do with fundamental questions about life, existence, pain and one's place in the world. Migrants spoke frankly and directly about their hardships, but would quickly move on to topics that gave meaning to their hardship, such as family, faith, strength and hope. Nonetheless, as suffering was central to their experience, we explored it with them.

Migrants spoke about the trauma, suffering and lack of protection that forced them from their homes. As we have been told repeatedly, forced migrants did not necessarily want to migrate. "This is not my country and I would have preferred to stay home, but I had no choice." "*Siento*

nostalgia por Honduras, pero no tuve opciones." The reasons for leaving typically included threat of abduction, repeated crime victimization, murder of a family member, extortion, threat of forced conscription and more. As an example, one man who owned a bus company in Mexico was forced to pay substantial bribes to a cartel in order to keep his operation going. When the demands for greater payments were impossible to meet, he told "them" that he could not comply; his oldest son was murdered by gunshot in front of him in a park. He abandoned his business and moved his family to El Paso where he sought asylum. He lost his son and his business, and as he said to us, he lost his country as well.

Upon deciding to leave and make the journey northward, migrants must contend with the many risks of travel. They include robbery and assault, harassment by Mexican police, military or immigration authorities and travel by dangerous means such as hitching rides on trucks or riding on railways such as *La Bestia*. A woman recounted that she had seen a child thrown from the rail car. Another was abducted while traveling and forced into sex work. More than one told us of nights spent sleeping outdoors in the cold where they huddled with children against the elements. After losing their money to a robber, many are forced to beg or do itinerant labor to continue the journey.

Once they have made it to the border, migrants are held back from entry by draconian border policies and immigration enforcement. Many find themselves camped

in parks and on sidewalks in Ciudad Juárez or staying in crowded shelters. The bizarrely-named Migrant Protection Protocol forced potential asylees to remain in Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings, during which time the Department of Homeland Security falsely claimed that “Mexico will provide them with all appropriate humanitarian protections for the duration of their stay.” (Department of Homeland Security, 2021, p. 1). Should they make an unauthorized crossing, they run the risk of arrest, interrogation and detention in temporary holding facilities, some of which are outdoors under bridges even when the weather is bad. Many are placed into long-term detention as a deterrent, later to be deported to their country of origin, or incredibly, escorted to the border bridge and expelled into Mexico with no means of support. Thus, the suffering is imposed systematically as a matter of federal policy. Indeed, institutionalized cruelty is the point.

Perhaps the most egregious human rights violation has been the forced separation of children from their parents. The *zero-tolerance* policy that was tested in El Paso in 2017 led to the long-term separation of nearly 3,000 children, some quite young, of whom 545 have yet to be reunited because the department has lost track of their parents (Shear, 2021; Dickerson, 2020).

The experience of trauma and suffering among forced migrants quickly surfaces when they describe their experiences.

A soft-spoken 42-year-old man from Guanajuato, Jalisco, Mexico fled north after he was forced to engage in corrupt activities by the police. When he refused, they abused him.

“Me amarraron de cabeza, me pusieron de boca en las narices y me golpeaban, intentaron matarme...Tengo mucho miedo de ir para allá porque yo sé que todavía viven algunos y si saben que yo estoy allá, yo sé que me van a encontrar y yo no quiero, yo no sé qué hacer.”

“They tied me upside down, covered my mouth and nose and beat me...they tried to kill me...I am very afraid to go there because I know that some of them are still there and if they know that I am here, they will find me and...I just didn’t know what to do.”

He fled to the United States and crossed with a coyote.

“Mi experiencia más difícil fue cuando cruzamos en la montaña de California, porque comenzamos bien a caminar y yo miré a mujeres, había mujeres, niños que ya no podían caminar y estaban llorando. Yo quería ayudarlas, pero pos no podía. No podía hacerlo porqué al ayudarlas me estaba quedando atrás con la demás gente y yo pues nomás les miraba quedarse ahí arriba en la montaña llorando, sufriendo y entre las víboras de



Boy from Michoacán is comforted by his friend as he weeps over the loss of his father who was murdered.

cascabel y los alacranes...a uno lo mordió una víbora de cascabel, otro, cuando brincamos se encajó una estaca de madera y le atravesó el pie, y ya no pudo caminar, y el coyote ahí lo dejó tirado.”

“My most difficult experience was when we crossed the mountains in California. We started off walking ok, but there were women and children who could no longer walk and were crying. I wanted to help them, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it because by helping them I would fall behind the other people and so I just watched them up there on the mountain crying, suffering among the rattlesnakes and scorpions ...one was bitten by a rattlesnake, another, when we jumped, a wooden stake was driven through his foot, and he could no longer walk, and the coyote just left him lying there.”

He was eventually caught by border enforcement authorities and was detained in Tacoma, Washington before being deported to Ciudad Juárez.

“Esta vez que viajé para allá, eh! tristeza, depresión, cómo se dice, no poder hacer nada por ayudar a la gente, me sentía como que no puedo, ni quería hacer muchas cosas, pero no podía hacer nada; ¡ah! miedo y pues ganas de llorar.”

“The time I traveled there, oh...the sadness, depression, how do you say, not being able to do anything to help people, I felt like I couldn’t, nor did I want to do many things, but I couldn’t do anything at all. Oh!...the fear, it just makes me want to cry.”

A young Honduran woman (18) fled because she was threatened by the Mara gang. A price had been put on her head and that of her baby boy. When asked why she left, she said:

“Pues, por una, salí porque hay mucha violencia. Hay muchas *Maras*. Los niños de pequeños se van haciendo malos, hay muchos niños ahí en Honduras de diez, once, nueve años ya andan con tatuajes, andan haciendo mala plaga, andan con machete, ahí se pelean entre ellos mismos, están pequeños, ahí hay muchas *Maras*. La Mara le cobra una renta, por cada casa va pidiendo lo que le conviene a ellos, y pues los vecinos no tienen...”
A mí me motivó porque me pusieron una amenaza a mí y a mi niño, y yo por mi niño salí, porque mi niño está pequeño, lo quiero ver crecer y me vine para acá, porque me amenazaron a mí.”

“Well, for one, I left because there is a lot of violence. There are so many Maras. The children at a very early age are becoming bad. There are lots of children there in Honduras who are ten, eleven, nine years old who are already covered with tattoos, going about like a bad plague, they walk with machetes. They fight among themselves; there are many Maras. The Mara extort payments, like a rent. For every household they demand whatever is convenient for them, and well, the neighbors don’t have anything...”

It pushed me to do something because they threatened me and my child, and so I left because my child is small and I want to see him grow up. So, I came here because they threatened me.”

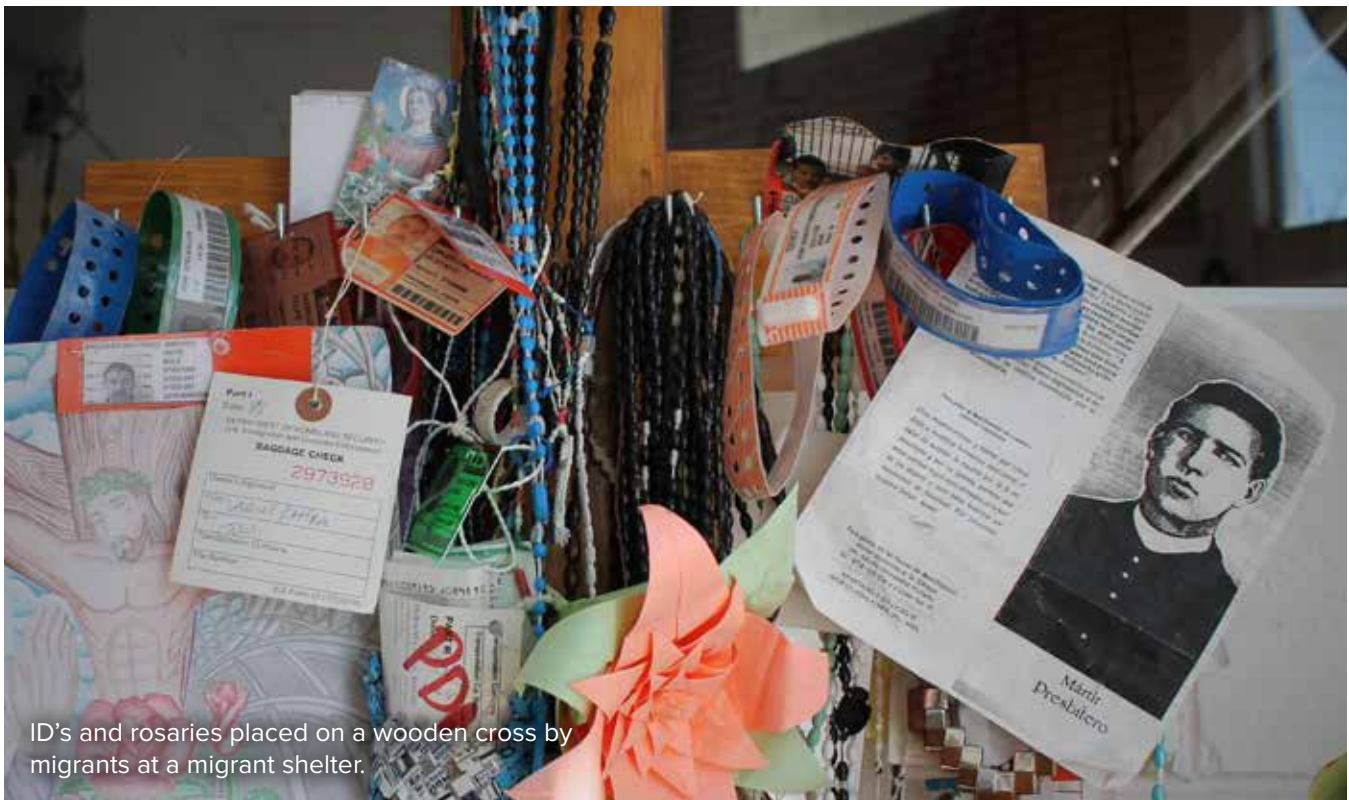
We asked: ¿De qué manera los amenazaron? (How did they threaten you?)

“Pagaban diez mil pesos para la cabeza del niño y la mía. Mi marido se vino para acá en México, y se vino con un amigo de allá, pero al amigo lo mató el tren por la mitad, y él me avisa que lo traen en migración ya para mandarlo para Honduras cuando pasó eso, y la familia está en contra de él y conmigo se querían desquitar.”

“They paid ten thousand pesos for the boy’s head and mine. My husband came here to Mexico and he traveled with a friend from home, but his friend was killed when the train ran over him and cut him in half. He tells me that they are holding him at migration and will deport him to Honduras. And so now, the family is against him and they wanted to retaliate against me.”

They abducted her and her child and threatened her mother to pay a bribe for their freedom.

“Pues querían abusar de mí, pero me querían drogar y todo, pero como nunca me ha gustado eso, yo me hice la desmayada, y me ponían un teléfono a la fuerza que yo hablara, pidiéndole dinero a mi mamá y todo, pero como nosotros no tenemos dinero ni nada, pues había tres hombres...tenían la cara tapada, nunca los ví. Estaba...yo iba para el parque, que me querían quitar al niño, pero no fue. Osea no, me quitaron el niño porque yo andaba con una tía y una prima, pero me llevaron a mí y a mi niño no.”



IDs and rosaries placed on a wooden cross by migrants at a migrant shelter.

“Well, they wanted to abuse me, they wanted to drug me and everything, but since I’ve never liked that, I pretended to pass out. They put me on the phone and forced me to speak, asking my mom for money and everything, but just like us they don’t have money or anything either. Well, there were three men...they had their faces covered, I never saw them. I was...I was going to the park, they wanted to take my child from me. I mean they didn’t take the child from me because I was with an aunt and a cousin, so they took me and not my child.”

We asked: *¿A dónde te llevaron? (Where did they take you?)*

“En un lugar feo, en un cuarto chico y todo, como que ahí tenían, llevaban a las demás mujeres. No pues me querían drogar, me pusieron una inyección, sí me adormecieron. No sé qué pasó en ese momento. Me maltrataban, me ponían a la fuerza.”

“To an ugly place, in a small room and everything, what they had there, and they took the other women. Well, they wanted to drug me, they gave me an injection, and made me sleepy. I don’t know what happened then. They mistreated me, they forced me.”

Her bribe was paid and she was able to leave and rode the cargo trains to Ciudad Juárez where we met her. The violence she experienced is not unique.

A thirty-year old farm laborer from Puerto Cortés, Honduras was shot after an altercation with the *Mara* and he made his way to the border where we met with him.

“La verdad me vine porque me querían matar allá pues yo fui balaceado y me vine huyendo, querían que me metiera a la pandilla y todo eso y por eso me vine huyendo.”

La verdad a mí...yo estaba en una ciudad y me agarró ya la tarde, porque yo tuve que irme en camión, y me agarró la tarde, y me estaban esperando en el camino. Iba con un amigo y también a mi amigo lo mataron y yo tuve suerte, pero sólo me balearon, pero a mi amigo sí lo mataron ya yendo para mi casa.

Nosotros sufrimos mucho desde allá. Sufrimos mucho porque dormimos en el tren, dormimos en la calle, en las vías, aguantamos hambre, aguantamos frío.”

“The truth is that I left because they wanted to kill me there and so when I was shot, I ran away. They wanted me to join the gang and all that and that’s why I ran away.”

The truth is...I was in a city and I was grabbed in the afternoon. I had to go on the bus and they grabbed me in the afternoon and were waiting for me on the route. I was with a friend and they killed my friend and I was lucky that they only shot me, but they did kill my friend while going home.

We suffered a lot. We suffered a lot because we had to sleep on the train, we slept on the street, on the tracks, we endured hunger, we endured cold.”

The suffering and trauma can also be indirect, such as witnessing the horrific.

“Bueno, es que se viven experiencias, tanto cuando uno mira como el tren mata a otras personas, porque incluso me tocó ver cómo el tren partió por la mitad a una persona. Son cosas difíciles. Uno llora con la gente, aunque no sea nada de uno, pero uno no sé...sostiene, llorar lágrimas, porque siempre son emigrantes igual que uno, y los mira cómo les quita la vida la Bestia.”

“Well, it’s that one lives these experiences, for example when you see how a train can kill people, because I saw a train cut a person in half. These are difficult things. You cry with people, even though it’s not something that happened to you, but you can’t cope with it, you shed tears, because after all, other immigrants are just like you, and you see how la Bestia takes their lives.”

A 44-year-old agricultural worker from Michoacán was assaulted along with his traveling companions in Tijuana. Police passed by, but did nothing.

“Agarré un taxi y en el transcurso del camino... una troca se le atravesó al taxi y me bajaron a mí, me pusieron unos rifles en la cabeza, pues querían dinero, yo no llevaba dinero, y también pues, pasaban, pasaban patrullas del municipio y no hacían nada...”

“I grabbed a cab and along the way, a truck ran into us, and they pulled me out of the cab and put guns to our heads and demanded money, but we had none, and meanwhile the city police drove by and did nothing.”

As they had no money, they were let go to continue their trip into California, where he did migrant farm labor. Eventually he was caught by *La Migra* and detained by immigration authorities under adverse conditions.

“Nos tenían en Nuevo México, las comidas que nos daban eran una bola así que parecía una tortuga, pero nos decían que era carne, pero no era carne, todo lo que la comida sabía, las bolas sabían cómo...como la cal bien amargosa, y luego pues nos daban el desayuno, los panecitos, y este...algo que era con jugo y carne, pero no era carne tampoco, no sé cómo se llama eso, toda la comida que nos daban ahí no sirve para nada. Al salir, no nos entregaron nuestras pertenencias, cuando me agarraron a mí me agarraron con novecientos dólares, novecientos pesos mexicanos, luego después nos pusieron a trabajar allá y no nos pagaron tampoco. Nos pusieron a lavar los baños, yo estaba lavando los baños, nos dijeron que nos iban a pagar siete dólares por semana y nunca nos pagaron nada.”

“They had us in New Mexico. The meals they gave us were like a ball, so it looked like a turtle, but they told us it was meat, but it was not meat. All of the food, the balls, tasted really bitter. And they gave us breakfast, bread rolls with some juice, and meat, but it wasn’t real meat either, I don’t know what it was called, but the food they gave us was worthless. When we were discharged, they did not give us back our belongings or our cash. When they caught me, I had 900 dollars and 900 pesos. They also made us work there and they did not pay us. We were made to clean the bathrooms and when I was doing that they told us they would pay us seven dollars a week, but they never paid us a cent.”

Many times, we heard that detained migrants had their documents taken away and not returned upon deportation, a particularly cruel act given their already marginalized status. Conditions in detention were difficult. In one US immigration detention center, we met a 25-year-old man from Acapulco, Mexico who had worked in a forge (herrería) and fled for the US from Mexico after his cousins were murdered.

“La verdad el encierro...porque nunca he estado encerrado. Sí, estaba yo encerrado; y que nos tuvieran a temperaturas muy bajas, pues sí. Es algo nuevo pues, yo no aguantaba así el frío y el encierro. Fue como nos tenían ahí, en una celda. Yo nunca he estado encerrado pues, y nunca he estado en nada de eso y llego aquí, para que me esposen, así como si fuera un criminal, pues la verdad yo sí me sentí así muy mal conmigo mismo...”

“The truth is that...being locked up...I had never been locked up before. And yes, I was incarcerated and the temperatures were really low. It was new to me and I just couldn't bear the cold or the confinement. It was like they held us there in a cell. I had never been locked up before or anything like that and when I got there, to be handcuffed as if I were a criminal, well the truth is that it made me feel very bad about myself.”

“La verdad, uno a veces se aguanta, pero también llora. A veces, pues sí se me llenaban, pues así, ya en la noche, yo solo pues, solo que nadie me viera para dormir. Muchas veces dicen que así el cuerpo descansa también, pues aguantar muchas emociones a veces me ponía muy estresado, muy loco y trataba de distraerme con juegos o con mis compañeros.”

“The truth is that at times you can bear it, but you also have to cry. Sometimes, it would fill me up and overwhelm me. At night, I would be alone with no one to see me, to sleep. They say that the body rests that way too because bearing so many emotions made me stressed out, pretty crazy, and so I tried to distract myself with games or with my companions.”

A 28 year-old Honduran man was kidnapped as he neared the US border. His sister in the US paid a ransom.

“...en Piedras Negras fue también por andar ahí, quererme ir para el otro lado ahorita, me agarraron, me secuestraron, pidieron un secuestro, ya me querían matar...” Fue mi error pues, por andar confiando en los mismos...yo di el número de mi hermana, pues ya tenía el número de mi hermana, ya me metieron a un cuarto, ya me sometieron a puro putazos, a golpes, puro golpes y ya para donde me hacía me daban duro pues, me torturaron los dedos, las piernas, la cabeza, ando bien golpeado de la cabeza.”

“Me tenían en un cuarto, sin salir y cada vez que hablábamos, un golpe para que yo hablara con mi hermana y mi hermana se tiraba a llorar pues, ella creía que si me iban a matar y sí le dije en serio...y como para ese rato estaba lloviendo para Piedras Negras ahorita...y le decían mira ahorita está lloviendo para acá y lo vamos a tirar allá al río, no vas a volver a saber nada de él y no si le mandaban fotos de mí a mi hermana, con los ojos vendados, tras con el número por mensaje, mi hermana...”

“...y ya esta es la tercera vez y esta sí me ha costado porque hay bastantes problemas aquí, ahorita en el DF hay que pagar, yo no sé cuánto a los policías para subirse al tren... porque si uno no paga la renta ahí, también lo golpean o lo matan. Ya han matado hondureños



Child at a migrant shelter in Ciudad Juárez.



Georgina Sanchez interviewing a migrant child.

ahí, por andar subiéndose al tren sin pagar la cuota. Traen unas cámaras aquí, y otra aquí en el casco, pero las apagan antes de hacer sus malechuras, y son de aquí de México, por qué hacen eso, pues de ahí uno tiene que pagar la cuota...”

“In Piedras Negras, going around and wanting to go to the other side [the US], they grabbed me, kidnapped me, demanded a payoff. They were ready to kill me. It was my mistake, for trusting the same people. I gave them my sister’s number. They stuck me in a room, they subjected me to brutal punching, to beatings, a real thrashing and wherever they struck me, they hit me really hard. They tortured my fingers, my legs, my head, my head was beaten very badly.

They kept me in a room that I could not leave and every time we talked, they would punch me so that I would talk to my sister [about the payoff] and my sister would start crying, she thought they were going to kill me and I told her they were dead serious...Since it was raining in Piedras Negras, they told her, “Look, right now it’s raining here and we’re going to throw him in the river. You’ll never hear from him again.” They sent pictures of me to my sister, blindfolded, with the number by message, my sister...(weeps).

And this is already the third time [trying to get to the States] and this time it has cost me because there are a lot of problems now in Mexico City. You have to pay, I don’t know how much to the police to get on the train...because if you don’t pay the rent there, they will also beat you up or kill you. They have already killed Hondurans there for getting on the train without paying the fee. The police have body cameras, here on the chest and another one here in the helmet, but they turn them off before they do their evil deeds, and they are from here in Mexico! Why do they do that? And so from there on you have to pay the fee.”

HOPE AND STRENGTH – ESPERANZA Y FUERZA

Hope, *esperanza*, is not just individual optimism; it is also transcendent in that it makes that which is seemingly unreachable within grasp (Clark & Hoffler, 2014). It is intrinsically bound up with resilience – the capacity to see beyond the immediate challenges of adversity and struggle for a better future. More than wishful thinking, hope “is a grounded, full-bodied belief in the power of people to change and claim a better tomorrow” (Bricker-Jenkins, Barbera & Myers, 2014, p. 223).

Consistent with the *paradox of resiliency*, migrants did not typically dwell on the suffering. Instead, they assign meaning to the hardships experienced on the journey and see it as their pilgrimage in relation to their *future* and their *family*. Their comments reveal courage, express hope and emphasize family.

“La *esperanza* de volver a ver a mi familia y la *esperanza* de no volver a pasar lo que pasé y creo que es lo que más me hace fuerte. Por mi hija también, verdad, siempre.”

“*The hope of seeing my family again and the hope of not going through what I went through again. I think that’s what does the most to keep me strong. For my daughter too, I have a six-year-old daughter that I have to get her through as best I can, doing it well, right? Always.*”

“Mi fuente de *fuerte* es...para mí, para mí, es no tener miedo. Ese es lo único que me ha dado *fuerte*.”

“*My source of strength is...for me...for me..is to have no fear. That is the only thing that has given me strength.*”

“Ahorita me siento así, pero sé que voy a salir de esto. Ahorita como ya estoy acá arriba también ya no me preocupo mucho. Lo que más me preocupaba era abajo, por todo lo que venía pasando, pero ahorita aquí me siento más, más seguro. Ya, digo yo, ya pasé, aquí solo lo que me preocupa es encontrar un trabajo y ver cómo rento un cuarto y ver cómo me acomodo para mientras. Eso es lo que más me preocupa. Ya no pienso que voy a agarrar el tren o que voy...así como abajo, que abajo no podía estar un ratito sin pensar...”

“*Well, that’s the way I feel right now, but I know I am going to get out of this! But now that I am up here [at the border], I don’t worry as much. When I was down south, I was preoccupied by all that was going on, but now here I feel, well, safer, more secure. I got through it so now what worries me is getting a job, finding a room to rent, and trying to get by as well as I can. That’s*

what worried me. I am no longer fretting about hopping on a train north, like I did down there where I couldn't stop thinking about it all."

"Me toca todavía seguir el camino, aquí como le digo, aquí ya no me preocupó mucho por eso, porque ya pasé lo más difícil, de todo lo que me pasó ya quiero olvidarlo, pero por lo mismo no lo olvido, pero siempre lo voy a tener aquí en la mente. Todo lo que he pasado, queda como una experiencia, me va a quedar de experiencia para toda la vida."

"I must stay on the journey. As I've said, I don't worry too much about it because I've already been through the hardest part, all of which I'd like to forget, but which I can't forget for some reason and I'm just going to have it on my mind. All that I have been through stays with me...as an experience, one that will be with me for the rest of my life."

"Esta siempre es la ilusión de cruzar y de ayudar más a la familia, pues porque uno siempre piensa cuando uno viene por lo menos ayudar a la mamá."

"There is always this dream of crossing over and being able to help your family back home. You feel that when you come (north), you must at least help your mother."

"No he llegado a mi punto donde yo quiero estar verdad, y me falta lo más difícil yo sé, porque si yo salgo ahorita o me voy mañana y agarro todo ese desierto no sé lo que me va a pasar, o me puede agarrar la migración, me secuestran, me pueden matar o quitarme la vida pues...verdad ese es otro de los riesgos que yo tengo también."

"I haven't really reached where I want to be and the most difficult thing I know is that if I leave now or tomorrow and go out into the desert, I don't know what will happen to me. I could be caught by migration authorities, kidnapped, murdered or killed...that's one of the risks I also must face."

"Yo salgo de Honduras, una, sí es por ayudarle a mi familia. Otra porque me vayan a matar. Entonces, yo no puedo regresar a Honduras. Yo, si prácticamente yo me pudiera quedar en México, yo arreglo papeles mexicanos y me quedo en México. Pero más que todo es por mi familia, para sacarlas de donde ellos están y que ellos puedan vivir en otro lugar."

"I leave Honduras, for one, yes...to help my family. Another reason is because they are going to kill me. So, I can't go back to Honduras. If practically, I could stay in Mexico, I would arrange Mexican papers and stay here. But more than anything it's for my family, to get them out of where they are so they can live somewhere else."

"No, pues, me siento bien por lo que te conté de mi pasado. Ahorita en el transcurso de este viaje espero que las cosas se recuperen. No violencia, no violencia en México, y que nos podamos entender, porque no hay barreras, no hay racismo, no hay color de piel, todos somos iguales y que todo salga adelante con la fe de Dios, que vamos a poder trabajar con los gobiernos, que venga buen gobierno este año."

"No...so I feel good about what I told you about my past. Now in the course of this journey, I hope that things get better...No violence, no violence in Mexico, and that we can understand each other, because there are no barriers, no racism, no skin color, we are all equal and everything goes forward with the faith in God, that we will be able to work with the government, that good government will emerge this year."

"No...pues, lo que me ayudó a ser fuerte fue mi hijo. Me refugié en él. Mi hijo es un angelito, solía decir, porque tenía fe en él."

"No...well, what helped me to be strong was my child. I took refuge in him. My child is a little angel, I used to say, because I had faith in him."

A 31-year-old woman from Honduras exemplifies the threads of desperation mixed with hope, courage, strength and faith that sustained her through multiple traumas. She left her village in Honduras after her brother was shot to death by the *Mara* for refusing to sell drugs. This, coupled with years of abuse from her alcoholic husband, forced her to flee. She made it to Mexico by bus and boarded *La Bestia*.

"Se subían a robar al tren y a robar a los inmigrantes... Gracias a Dios a mí nunca me tocó que me robaran, pero sí nos escondíamos en las góndolas del tren y pues gracias a Dios corrí con suerte, porque también a muchas mujeres las violan y también les hacen cosas bien feas. La experiencia más difícil que viví fue cuando un hondureño estaba pasando de góndola en góndola y se fue para el medio del tren y el tren lo partió en dos."

“They boarded the trains to rob the migrants. Thank God I was never robbed, but we did hide in the train cars and thank God I was lucky, because many women were raped and they did very ugly things to them. The most difficult experience I had was when a Honduran man was going from rail car to car and he fell to the tracks and the train cut him in half.”

After running out of money, she stayed in *casas del migrante*, slept outdoors and passed days without a blanket, without food, staying near the train tracks, but eventually found refuge with a Mexican family that gave her a place to stay and she was able to find work. In time, she sent for her children in Honduras and applied for permanent residency in Mexico.

“Encontré a unas personas cristianas en Celaya que me echaron la mano y me prestaron una casa en la que me pude acomodar. Me puse a trabajar, estuve trabajando en Gamesa, las personas cristianas me ayudaron, fui a migración y saqué mi residencia temporal y todo. Después, con el paso del tiempo me hice residente permanente, pude hacerme residente legal, no exponerlos a lo que yo me expuse pues. Gracias a Dios aquí estamos y estamos bien.”

“I ran across some Christian people in Celaya who gave me a hand and lent me a house where I could get settled. I started working. I was working at Gamesa [a grocery store], and the Christians helped me. I went to Immigration and got my Mexican temporary residency and everything. Later, as time went by, I became a permanent resident. I was able to become a legal resident, not to expose them (my kids) to what I was exposed to. Thank God we are here and are fine.”

“Sólo le pido a Dios que me de fuerza, porque no creas siempre uno tiene nostalgia y sentimientos y uno no encuentra que hacer. Hay veces que uno piensa que todo está perdido, yo por mis hijos le echo ganas, porque no me gusta que me miren mal, porque si yo me pongo mal, ellos se ponen mal.”

“I only ask God to give me strength, because you always have nostalgia, homesickness, and feeling that you just don’t know what to do. There are times when you think that everything is lost. I try hard for my children because I don’t want them to look down on me, because if I turn bad, they will also be bad.”

We asked: ¿Qué fue lo que te mantuvo en pie durante tu viaje de migración? (What kept you going during the migration journey?)

“Mis hijos, pensar en un mejor futuro para ellos, en una mejor educación, porque eso es lo que más pienso, en una buena educación para ellos.”

“My children, to think about a better future for them, a better education, because that’s what I think about the most, a good education for them.”

As with nearly all of the migrants we met, she was also sustained by faith.

“La verdad es que yo tengo creencias católicas, pero no soy devota como ir a misa y eso, pero si paso por la iglesia me persigno, me persigno de noche, rezo un padre nuestro. Siempre digo que Dios me quiere porque me tiene viva, que me quiere porque me dio mis niños que son una bendición. Hago oraciones y le doy gracias a Dios por cada día, le pido que me de salud, que me trabaje, que me de dinero... salud más que todo, que me proteja a mí y a mis niños porque aquí no conocemos a nadie, no tenemos familia ni nada.”

“The truth is that I have Catholic beliefs, but I am not devout like going to Mass and all that, but if I do go to church I make the sign of the cross. I make the sign of the cross at night. I pray an “Our Father.” I always say that God loves me because he has kept me alive and that he loves me because he gave me my children, who are a blessing. I say prayers and give thanks to God every day. I ask him to give me health, to give me work, to give me money... health more than anything, to protect me and my children because here we don’t know anyone, we don’t have family or anything.”

FAITH

La Fe (faith) is frequently a foundation on which migrants build perseverance and hope. In interviews, they discussed the importance of faith and religion as a resource that sustained them through adversity and helped them remain focused on their future (Lusk, Terrazas, Caro, Chaparro & Puga, 2019). Faith and spirituality are linked to positive mental health (Riosema & Jochem, 2012; Weber & Pargament, 2014) and help mediate anxiety and stress among Hispanics (Hondagneu-Sotelo, Gaudinez, Lara & Ortiz, 2004; Lujan & Campbell, 2006). Religiosity and faith also reduce psychological distress among migrants (Diwan, Jonnalagadda, & Balaswamy, 2004; Mui & Kang, 2006; Kirchner & Patiño, 2010).

When we explored protective factors in migration, such as the individual and social assets that help people cope, migrants invariably referred to their faith. As one young woman from Guatemala said, “I believe that faith ends when life ends. Even though it is difficult, one always has to fight and to have hope. I think it is the last thing that one can lose, no matter how dark it is.” Faith was something that sustained them – a source of hope.

A 48-year-old Guatemalan man and coffee farmer became active as a volunteer environmental activist.

“Participé con unos grupos para defender el derecho de las tierras... Allá en esos lugares

uno no permitía que la mina sacara cosas del terreno, que contaminaran el agua, o algo más. Y como allá había un líquido que se llama mercurio y la gente no permite que lo saquen.”

“I worked with some groups to defend land rights... There in those places one did not allow the mines to remove things from the land, to contaminate the water, or anything else. And there was a liquid there called mercury and we didn't allow them to take it out.”

He fled Guatemala after a fellow activist was murdered for protesting the development of a mercury mine. He left for Mexico and was threatened by *sicarios* in Tijuana, but felt that it would be impossible to return to face certain death in Guatemala. When asked about how he deals with his situation, he noted:

“Pues la verdad antes de salir, no sólo yo como también la gente de allá suele ser grandes oraciones a Dios antes de salir, se pide antes, puede ser un mes, quince días o una semana antes se pide a Dios fuertemente para llegar a un triunfo. La verdad, es que yo sí he visto los milagros, aunque hay mucho peligro en el camino. Pues, el tener fe hasta llegar al destino final... Uno sufre, pero no tan fácil si se le acaba

uno el dinero hay que trabajar para que pueda seguir uno, sino se queda a medio camino uno.”

“So, the truth is that before leaving, not just me but also the other activists, we usually offer big prayers to God before hitting the road. We pray before leaving, it can be a month, fifteen days or a week before. We pray hard to God to have a successful outcome. The truth is that I have seen miracles, even though there is great danger along the way. So, having faith until you reach the final destination. One suffers, but it is not easy if you run out of money. You have to work so that you can continue, otherwise you are just halfway there.”

A thirty-two-year-old farmworker from southern Chihuahua near Parral was being forced by a criminal group to join a gang.

“Pues la verdad, me amenazaron ahí. Querían meterme a trabajar a la fuerza y yo me negué, y pues salí de allá.”

“So, truthfully, they threatened me there. They wanted to force me to work and I refused, so I left.”

He fled, and was arrested by the Border Patrol crossing through the desert and was then deported to Ciudad Juárez. Throughout, faith sustained him.

“Hazte cuenta que yo en Dios siempre confío, y siempre tengo fe y se, siempre lo he sentido que nunca me ha dejado solo, siempre me ha ayudado a salir de cualquier problema y todo así siempre y siempre he tenido problemillas así y yo le pedido a Dios y siempre se me resuelve todo.”

“Be aware that I always trust in God and I always have faith and I know and feel that he has never left me alone, he has always helped me overcome any problem and while I had little problems like that, I have always asked God and everything is always solved.”

A 19-year-old bakery worker from San Pedro Sula, Honduras fled after a price was put on his head over the accidental death of his friend. On the journey north on the train, he and his wife and child were assaulted and robbed. They made it to the US and were arrested and detained for six months, “...donde tratan como perros a uno...(where they treat you like dogs).” His family was deported. Asked what gave him strength during this ordeal, he said that everything happened for a reason:



View of the Paso del Norte Port of Entry from Ciudad Juárez.

“Mucha fe, siempre en Dios ponía la mirada arriba, yo le decía que me cuidara al niño, aunque pasara lo que pasara, que sufriera, pero con tal...yo sabía que todo lo que estaba pasando era por algo. Sufrí, pero sabía que iba a llegar aquí, voy a llegar porque voy a llegar, todo lo que está pasando es por algo, y así fue. Mire, aquí estoy, y mucha gente me decía te van a matar, varia gente me decía regálame al niño, que no debe estar sufriendo. No, no lo voy a regalar, porque yo con mi familia, yo con mi mamá no tuve un abrazo de ella, ni de mi papá, pues de chiquito me dejaron solo, mi abuela y todo eso. Entonces, eso les decía, pues no quiero que mi niño pase lo mismo, que no sienta el calor del papá de verdad...”

“A lot of faith, I always turned my face up to God and asked him to take care of my child, regardless of what happened, even if I suffered, but even so...I knew that everything was happening for a reason. I suffered, but I knew I was going to reach my goal. I am going to get here because I am going to get here! Everything that happened is for a reason, and so it was. Look, here I am, and many people told me they are going to kill you, many people told me to give my child to them, he should not be suffering. No, I am not going to give him away. With my family, with my mother I did not have a hug from her, nor from my father, because when I was a little boy I was left alone, my grandmother and all that. So, that’s what I was telling them, I don’t want my child to go through the same thing, not to feel the warmth of a real father.”

In Juárez, we met a 35-year-old dairy worker from Michoacán who had been deported from Idaho. While in Idaho, he was attacked and stabbed with his young son during an armed robbery. The police arrested the assailant and he was convicted. The dairy worker applied for a U Visa as a victim of violent crime, but it was denied and he was deported.

“Yo tengo fe. Ha habido ocasiones en las que yo me estaba bañando y de repente se me ha venido... Como una pantalla y ahí me he mirado, a mí, y Dios me ha dicho que voy a regresar a los Estados Unidos algún día... Yo le digo que me ayude entonces, si eso es lo que él quiere... Me ha puesto como una película en mi mente despierto, una película de lo que yo voy hacer cuando regrese a la iglesia en la que yo fui bautizado.”

“I have faith. There have been times when I

was bathing and all of a sudden it’s come to me...something like a screen and I’ve seen myself there, and God has told me that I will return to the United States one day...I tell Him to help me, if that’s what He wants...it’s been like a movie in my mind while I’m awake, a movie of what I will do when I go back to the church where I was baptized.”

Many have said that those who have helped them along the way reinforced their faith with their astonishing generosity. A wide range of people assisted migrants. There were those at the shelters – volunteers, priests and lay workers, but also those along the way who gave them alms, let them stay in a spare room or employed them briefly as house workers. Notable are the women who stand by the train tracks to pass food and water to migrants as the train slows down on a turn.

A Honduran woman noted:

“Es que a mí en todo el camino me han atendido pero excelente, como le digo, mi Diosito me viene poniendo las personas, porque sabe que yo no quiero hacer el mal. Yo vengo con buenas intenciones. Él me va poniendo las personas, me va poniendo los ángeles que me van cuidando, y nunca me falta. Si es comida, yo voy a una casa, yo pido comida nunca me dicen que no, si yo les pido una moneda siempre me ayudan...”

“So during the whole journey I’ve been cared for wonderfully, like I tell you, my God has put people in my path, because He knows that I don’t want to do wrong. I come with good intentions. He has brought me these people and put angels in my path who have taken care of me, and I never lack for things. If it’s food, I go to a house, I ask for food and they never say no, if I ask for some money they always help me...”

A Guatemalan man who worked on a rice plantation said:

Bueno a veces dándome dinero, un señor de entrada me dio veinte dólares de volada, para que te alivianes, para que compres ropa, porque siempre llego sucio...entonces me dio veinte varos. ‘Ten’ me dice, bueno con esos veinte me fui a comprar comida, mi ropa y allá otra persona me ayudó también a comprar ropa al siguiente día, no sé qué día fue, pero si las llevo en mi mente y nunca los voy a olvidar, en donde sea que estén, mi México siempre es bien, ama a los centroamericanos que se portan bien.”

“Sometimes they give money, one man gave me twenty dollars out of nowhere, so that you can take care of yourself, so you can buy clothes, because I always arrive dirty...so he gave me twenty dollars. ‘Here’ he said, and with that twenty dollars I went to buy food, some clothes and then another person also helped me buy clothes the next day, I don’t know what day it was but I carry them in my mind and I’ll never forget them, wherever they are, my Mexico is always good, they love Central Americans who behave.”

“The doctors are very nice, Mexican people are very good, very good, all Mexicans are really good, we were close by and they came to help us, they’re very good.

People, people help you a lot, they help you get ahead and give support, if you enter Tapachula, when I entered they told me...they’ve helped me get ahead, people have supported me and they say ‘keep your head up, you’ll make it’ and they’ve helped me get ahead.”

Selflessness and generosity of spirit emerge as themes in the stories of care provided to migrants along the journey.

“Los doctores son muy amables, la gente mexicana es bien buena, bien buena, todos los mexicanos son bien buenos, aunque estuvimos cerca que nos pudieron ayudar a llegar, son muy buenos.”

“Las personas, las personas lo ayudan mucho a uno, los sacan adelante siempre dan el apoyo, si uno entra ahí en Tapachula, cuando vienen entrando le dicen...me han sacado adelante, las personas me han dado apoyo y ellos le dicen ‘ánimo van a llegar’ y ellos me han sacado adelante.”



Chapel at Annunciation House (Migrant Shelter in El Paso, Texas).

MIGRANT CHILDREN

Child migration is one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges of our time. Being both a child and a migrant creates a highly vulnerable situation that results in the violation of their fundamental rights. It is necessary to recognize migrant children as being children first and as subject to protection with full rights of expression and social status regardless of nationality (UNICEF, 2019).

Violence and extreme poverty are the most common factors that push parents to emigrate with their children. Parents invest their hopes in reaching the North to provide safety and basic necessities for their children. Violent gangs, such as the *Barrio 18*, are on the lookout to recruit children as young as eleven. They are drafted into the illegal drug trade, but if they resist, threats of violence ensue. Parents say that their daughters are being watched to make them “girlfriends” of gang members (Leutert, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, criminal groups have targeted children who are confined to their homes (Dreifuss, 2021).

El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras are the countries with the highest rates of child poverty in the western hemisphere, 44%, 54%, 68% and 74% respectively (UNICEF, 2018). Central American children are 10 times more likely to be killed than children in the United States (Acuna, 2018). In El Salvador and Honduras, a child becomes a victim of homicide every day. In Mexico, four children die every day due to violence and

30,000 children were kidnapped into organized crime in 2019 (Lopez, 2019).

Parents exhibit strength and wisdom when deciding to emigrate. They face the reality that their homes are no longer a safe place and make the difficult yet courageous decision to flee. Children embark on the journey with equal determination.

We interviewed over 60 children between the ages of 8 to 12 who migrated from different regions of Central America and Mexico. The interviews were in a shelter on the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala and at a shelter in Ciudad Juárez. We took extraordinary precautions in compliance with the university’s Institutional Review Board on health and ethical considerations when working with children while also respecting the protective measures against COVID-19.

By meeting with the children, we got a glimpse into their unique experiences and heard about their migration in their own words. The children and their families carry out their migration weaving through different terrains and crossing borders that have become increasingly dangerous and restricted by the pandemic. With blisters on their small feet, hunger and thirst, having to sleep in the streets under the constant threat of violent gangs, smugglers, and corrupt authorities, they continue their trek to a hopeful future.

Violence in the Country of Origin

Approximately 60,000 members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* gang live in El Salvador (Martinez, 2020). Many of its members and supporters have become lawyers, government officials and even police officers in the service of the gang. As a result, their influence has grown to such a degree that political parties in El Salvador have turned to gangs to win elections. When police are called into action, the suspects are often warned in advance by officials, resulting in their escape. Behind closed doors, the authorities admit they are waging a war that they cannot win. According to reports from the Salvadoran government, there is currently a gang truce due to the pandemic and negotiations with the gangs have halted (Martinez, 2020).

Salvadoran children interviewed define this dynamic as a “war.” When one child was asked to explain what he meant by war, he responded:

“Déjeme ver cómo le puedo explicar ¿Usted sabe lo que es una pistola? Los *bichos* (young men) de mi barrio están peleando contra los *Maras*. Por ejemplo, si yo cruzo la calle grande del otro lado, ellos me matan. Algunas veces los *Maras* se meten a mi barrio, se escuchan los silbidos, salen todos los *bichos* y se empiezan a pelear. Así pasa mucho tiempo, y ahí quedan los muertos. Como yo acabo de cumplir 12, mi mamá me sacó del barrio.”

“Let me see, how can I explain it? Do you know what a pistol is? The men of my neighborhood were fighting against the Maras. For example, if I were to cross the big street on the other side, they would kill me. Sometimes the Maras come into my neighborhood, you hear the whistling, all the men come out and they start to fight. That’s how it is a lot of the time, and that’s where the dead stay. Since I turned 12, my mom took me out of the neighborhood.”

A 9-year-old girl relates that the *Maras* threatened her mother. She went to the police, but nothing happened. They moved to a different town, but soon the gangs found them. One night, the *Maras* entered her home and took her 13-year-old sister. The child stated, “Solo le pido a Dios que la lleve pronto al cielo.” (I only ask God that he quickly takes her to heaven.)

Some of the children we interviewed were from small rural mountain communities in Guatemala. Criminal groups have tried to purchase their land; however, they will accept no amount of money because the land defines who they are. Thus, their land was taken by force.

An 11-year-old boy told us that a group of men killed his father and grandfather. The criminals will stop at nothing to get what they want.

“Yo estaba jugando con mi hermanito afuera de la casa cuando escuché gritos y vi que le dispararon a mi abuelo. Agarré a mi hermanito y corrimos, y corrimos hacia abajo, para dentro del campo. Nos escondimos entre unas matas de maíz. Yo sabía que mi padre Dios y los espíritus de la montaña nos iban a proteger. Empezó a llover muy fuerte y así, la Santa Nube, el Santo Rayito y el Santo Viento los alejaron.

Ya nos había dicho nuestro abuelo que si algo así pasaba nos fuéramos directo con el *Padrecito*, así lo hice y ahí llegaron después toda la familia. Con la misma, nos fuimos escondidos en dos camionetas hasta el otro pueblo y de ahí caminamos toda la noche hasta aquí. Yo rezo para que a donde lleguemos encontremos un lugar donde vivir, arriba, en la montaña. Los espíritus malos viven abajo.”

“I was playing outside with my little brother when I heard shouts and I saw that they shot my grandfather. I grabbed my brother and we ran, we ran down into the field. We hid among some corn plants. I knew that my father God and the spirits of the mountain would protect us. It started to rain really hard and that way the Saint of the Clouds, the Saint of the Sun and the Saint of the Wind pushed them away.

Our grandfather had already told us that if something like that happened, we should go straight to the priest, that’s what I did and then the whole family went there. With my family, we hid in two buses and went to another village and from there we walked all night to get here. I pray that when we get to our destination we find a place to live that’s above, in the mountains. The bad spirits live below.”

EL CAMINO Y LA FE

The migrant children we interviewed traveled continuously from the time they left their homes until they arrived in Mexico. Most commonly, they would walk to the Guatemala-Mexico border. To avoid checkpoints and immigration officials on bus routes, they frequently had to get off the bus or truck and walk around inspection points through the jungle and plantations until they reached the river that divides the border between Mexico and Guatemala. Having to walk at night, the migrants would get lost and spend precious time returning to the route.

A 10-year-old Honduran boy said he left his home in San Pedro Sula with both of his parents. They traveled to the border of Tekún Uman, Guatemala. Upon arrival, the immigration agents did not allow them to pass.

“Ellos querían que nos regresáramos. Nosotros no queríamos, y no queríamos. Nos tenían en un alto ahí y nos dijo un policia ‘Ahí entonces aguanten hambre. Ahí se van a arrepentir de estar bajo la lluvia.’ Empezó a llover muy fuerte. Yo no entiendo cómo es que no nos dejaron entrar a la estación sabiendo que estábamos ahí con esa lluvia. ¿Cómo es que esos adultos pudieron ser así?”

Al siguiente día uno de los federales nos dijo que si intentábamos pasar nos iban a meter a la cárcel. Nos fuimos pa’ atrás de vuelta. Sólo se nos quedaron viendo los policías, no nos dijeron nada. Pasamos por un río, por unas plataneras. Luego llegamos a otro río y nos pasaron en balsas. Después caminamos y caminamos. Yo para seguir adelante siempre pienso que vamos a pasar, primero un lugar, luego aquí, y luego en los Estados Unidos. Si

Dios lo permite. Yo les digo a los niños como yo que no se detengan, y les deseo que Dios los guarde.”

“They wanted us to return. We didn’t want to, we didn’t want to. They had us stopped there and the policeman told us ‘Deal with hunger then. You’re going to regret being out in the rain.’ It started to rain really hard. I don’t understand why they wouldn’t allow us to enter the station if they knew that we were out there in the rain. How could adults be like that?”

The next day one of the immigration agents told us that if we tried to pass they would put us in jail. We turned around to go back. The police just looked at us and didn’t say anything. We passed a river and then a banana plantation. Then we got to another river and they crossed us on rafts. After that we walked and walked. To keep going, I kept thinking that we would cross first to one place, then here, and then we would be in the United States. If God permits. I would tell kids like me that they shouldn’t stop and I hope that God protects them.”

A 12-year-old boy from Honduras in Ciudad Juarez recalled:

“Lo más difícil que me ha pasado durante el viaje ha sido la caminata. A veces teníamos que correr y cargar las maletas. Tuvimos que tirar las cosas porque nos cansaban mucho. A mí lo que me saca adelante son las personas que nos apoyan. Por ejemplo, cuando vamos caminando, y se dan cuenta que somos



Virgin of Guadalupe at the Ysleta Port of Entry in Ciudad Juárez.

migrantes, nos acercan con un plato de comida, algo de tomar. La comunidad.

Le doy gracias a Dios porque llegamos hasta aquí y tenemos donde dormir y comer. También tener un lugar donde nosotros los niños podamos jugar, y donde nuestras mamás puedan lavar.”

“The hardest thing that happened to me during the journey was the walk. Sometimes we had to run and carry our suitcases. We had to throw things out because they were too heavy and we were exhausted. What helps me move forward is the people that supported us. For example, when we were walking and they saw that we were migrants, they would bring us a plate of food or something to drink. The community.

I thank God because we made it here and we have somewhere to sleep and eat. They also have a place where we (the kids) can play, and where our moms can wash clothes.”

How were you able to continue the journey?

“Con la voluntad de Dios...No voy a decirme a mí mismo, ‘si pasó esto, no voy a poder

superarlo.’ No, al contrario, si paso, yo voy a poder superarlo y a seguir adelante. Tener fuerza y como yo siempre he sabido que cosas así, difíciles, siempre van a pasar.

“With God’s help...I’m not going to say to myself, ‘If this happens, I won’t be able to overcome it.’ No, on the contrary, if it happens, I will be able to overcome it and keep going. Having strength and how I’ve always known that things like that, difficult things, are always going to happen.”

Yo sé que algún día voy a tener mi casa y voy a apoyar a mi mamá. Mi fortaleza es Dios, mi madre y mi familia. Pero lo que más me preocupa es tener mi casa. Cuando ya tenga una casa y ver que todo esté bien, ya voy a poder estudiar para ser científico. Voy a investigar, descubrir, para así, enseñar.”

“I know that one day I will have a house and support my mom. My strength is God, my Mom, and my family. But what worries me the most is having a house. When I have a house and I see that everything is good, I will be able to study to become a scientist. I’m going to research, discover and then teach.”

An 11-year-old girl migrating with her mother and her baby brother left Honduras in January 2020 along with a caravan.

“En el camino nosotros mirábamos muchos muertos. Muertos que se caían de los camiones. Íbamos en el camión pasando por El Salvador y se subieron unos *Birros* (young men). El camión ya había andado unos kilómetros y me di cuenta que unos hombres, los llevaron a la puerta de atrás y los tiraron, aún cuando el camión se movía.

Me asusté mucho y le pregunté a mi mamá cómo es que los habían tirado así. Una señora que iba al lado de nosotros nos dijo que eran *Maras*, éstos que han estado contaminando Honduras. Luego dijo, ‘O los matamos, o nos matan.’ Creo que venían *mariguanados* y se caían. Yo sólo le pido a Dios que nos saque adelante para ayudar a nuestra familia. Le diría a otra niña migrando que no le haga caso a lo que le digan las demás personas, que tenga fe de que va a seguir para adelante, y va a pasar. En las manos de Dios vamos nosotros.”

“On the journey we saw a lot of dead people. People who fell off the buses. We were on a bus passing through El Salvador and some young guys got on. The bus was a few kilometers out and I noticed that the men would take people to the door at the back of the bus and throw them out even though the bus was moving. It scared me a lot and I asked my Mom how they could do something like that. A woman next to us said they are Maras, the ones who are contaminating Honduras. Then she said, ‘Either we kill them or they kill us.’ I think they were high and would fall down. I only ask God that He brings us out ahead so we can help our family. I would tell other girls who migrate that they shouldn’t pay attention to what other people say, they should have faith that they will come out ahead, and it will happen. We go in God’s hands.”

Based on our field observations and analysis, children who migrate are alarmingly underweight and spoke to us about having frequently suffered from hunger. We also observed that children at the southern border of Mexico, and thus beginning their migration, were more engaged and displayed fewer signs of traumatic stress than children who had recently arrived at the northern border city of Ciudad Juarez. It was apparent that those who had been on the journey for some time had endured more and that their well-being, hope and faith was less evident.

The phenomenon of child migration from Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America requires urgent attention and a fundamental paradigmatic shift. Paradoxically, for many, their psychological and social attributes show exceptional maturity. They draw support from the accompaniment of and social connection to other migrants, especially their mothers, and are protected by the network of fellow migrants and compassionate people who reach out to them along their journey. They have social resources and agency skills to engage with social support networks and, as they say, “seguir adelante.” They are surprisingly resilient and courageous and feel that they are part of a family and community that sustains them. The resilience of child migrants is not an innate individual attribute, but is a function of their deep connections to others, their families, trusted adults, elders and mentors, and migrant trust networks (Lusk et al., 2019). It is also grounded in their cultural traditions, including core values like familism, collectivism, respeto, faith, as well as cultural rituals that reinforce their identity and self-efficacy” (Lusk et al., 2019; Ungar, 2008). These protective factors serve as buffers that mediate trauma and reduce its severity and promote healing.

That being said, we cannot emphasize strongly enough that some of the migrant children have been immensely and irreversibly damaged by complex trauma - the repeated exposure to harm over an extended period of time. While migrant children often accompany their family, their psychological resources may not always be enough for the challenges they face during the dangerous journey through Mexico and arrival at the US-Mexico border. Childhood trauma can have lasting effects on the cognitive, psychological and moral development of children. Because many migrant children have been harmed or been witnesses to extreme adversity, their paths ahead may be fraught with peril (Dye, 2018; Ungar & Perry, 2012).

The unnecessary suffering of migrant children will be resolved when root causes and conditions in the countries of origin do not force them to leave their homes or when there are viable options for them to migrate through regular policies. It is important that the policies of the countries involved recognize the best interests of the child, not only in its discourse, but in upholding the rights of the child.

CONCLUSION

What the migrant paradox of resilience teaches us is that we are not engaging with broken people who must be mended. Migrants are often strong, resilient, socially embedded, sustained by faith and culturally grounded. They generally do not see themselves as victims. Some may call them survivors, yet given their coping skills it may be more accurate to call them “thrivers.” Thus, we must reverse the narrative of deficits that characterizes the dialogue about migrants. The Nativist rhetoric about immigrants depicts them as a threat to the economy, prevailing social values and national security. To prop up such a narrative requires a dehumanization that depicts them as being of lesser significance. At best, it sees them mostly as damaged, which is but part of the narrative.

The trauma they experience is real and there is nothing to be gained by minimizing it. Indeed, recognizing and acknowledging severe adversity is a core principle of

trauma-informed care and something all social workers, psychologists and volunteers strive to appreciate. But trauma does not characterize a survivor; it is their strength that defines them. So, we must recognize and reverse the sources of trauma and repair the social injustices that produce it, while building on the strengths and assets of those who overcome it.

Reducing suffering is the work of social justice, especially when it is rooted in destructive social policies. Suffering is serious business, but we do not have to be paralyzed by the gravity of the unwarranted anguish of refugees. While acknowledging their struggles and endurance, we must work with them to repair the world. Inspired by individual testimonies of hope and resilience, we must address the root causes of forced migration and the global mass displacement of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

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