Columns
Ministry



Military police in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, keep watch on suspected MS-13 gang members in this June 20, 2016, photo. According to Human Rights Watch, criminal gangs are believed to be responsible for the high murder rate in Honduras. The gangs impose weekly extortion fees, and death is the price for too long a delay in payment. (CNS photo/Reuters/Jorge Cabrera)



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In July I was in Honduras. It was a powerful experience for which I am very grateful. I wrote some of my reflections in a column published earlier by Global Sisters Report. There is one significant story, however, that I left out of that column.

In the midst of the 12 days in Honduras, I was by myself for a day. I stayed in a large dormitory room in a remote rural and heavily militarized area. The delegation spent two nights there. The day between those nights, I stayed at our place of accommodation because of significant diarrhea. I was too depleted for the agenda of that day and was grateful for the option of sleeping in easy proximity to toilet facilities.

Electricity was out in the area. My bunk bed was by a window. On the other side of the window was a small dirt path that was a dead end street with a couple residential houses.

Just after dark someone was killed outside my window.

I saw nothing. I heard everything.

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There was the sound of a lightweight motorbike on the dirt road. Six rounds of live gunfire. The sound of the motorbike leaving. Wailing of the wife and children of the man I presumed was already dead.

No one came. There was no ambulance. No police. No sounds of neighbors coming to comfort the family. Wailing. The shock and grief were tangible.

I started this experience in pajamas, in a bunk bed under the window. For a short time, I hid in between bunk beds, half under one. I picked an area halfway between the window and the door – far enough from the window in case more shooting ensued and stray bullets came my way. I knew a shower stall would be safer, but it was dark and I wanted to see if anyone came in the room. Something in me also

knew that I needed to listen and not miss anything. Something in me knew that my witnessing was significant.

Not sure how the next bit of time would unfold, I sneaked back to my bunk bed to get clothes and shoes. I was thinking that if I got kidnapped, I at least wanted shoes and real clothes. I was never really in danger; the grounds were securely locked and I wasn't really afraid. But I needed to not be in pajamas and bare feet. After getting dressed, I returned for a time to my hiding spot

Wailing. The man killed was someone's beloved husband, and a beloved dad to children.

I was now fully dressed. I started to sense that the imminent danger was over. It seemed to be a targeted killing. From the sounds in the alleyway the shooter had killed the intended target.

I stayed on my side of the dormitory wall. I was the unseen observer and witness to a tragic violent death of someone's husband and father.

I pondered going into the alleyway. I wondered if I could — the grounds we were on were locked to keep us safe. Would I even be able to go out to the alleyway? If I did, would I be able to return to the dormitory? I didn't know how long it would be before the bus came back with other members of the delegation. If I got locked out, I wouldn't have access to the toilet facilities. Diarrhea was still problematic.

Ultimately, I decided not to go into the alleyway because I didn't speak the language. I allowed myself to believe that I couldn't be present in a meaningful way to this family with such immediate and intense shock and grief because I couldn't adequately communicate.

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I am a Sister of Mercy committed to being a face of the mercy and love of God. The shock and grief of the family of a man killed in front of his wife and children was clear. In this moment of intense shock and grief for them, I stayed on the other side of the wall, hidden from view.

My heart broke for the family. My heart still breaks for them. And I stayed on the other side of the wall, hidden from view, holding them in prayer.

I did what I thought was my job — stay safe and not create unnecessary risk for the delegation or get myself into a situation where there were so many unknowns. I was unable to do what I'm called and committed to do — be a face of the mercy and love of God to people in need.

I was the unseen witness. I am here to tell the story.

This is one story. The story of one man senselessly killed. The story of grief and shock and immeasurable trauma for those who love him. Those closest to him loved him dearly. There is no mistaking profound deep love in the sounds of wailing.

This is the story I know. This is the story I witnessed. And it is just one story.

"Summary executions and murders are part of ordinary life for people in Honduras," writes Honduran journalist Wendy Funes. She continues: "Those who kill — criminals and the state — do so with impunity and just 10% face trial. Honduras has one of the highest rates of impunity worldwide."

Human Rights Watch reports that gangs are believed to be responsible for the high murder rate in Honduras, with MS-13 and Barrio 18 particularly ruthless. Criminal gangs impose weekly extortion fees, and death is the price for too long a delay in payment. Security forces (police and military) are alleged to collude with gangs, and routinely use excessive and deadly force to quell social movements. The U.S. has continued to support the Honduran security forces despite their involvement in repression as well as drug trafficking.

I will never know the name of the man whose death I witnessed. I will never know if his death is even recorded as a homicide. I may never be fully at peace with my choice to remain hidden on the other side of a wall.

I am left with the question: "Can witnessing ever be a work of mercy?"

Might my experience make my heart ever more responsive to the suffering of those around me? Might my storytelling make readers' hearts ever more responsive to the suffering around them?

How can we together break down the borders, walls and divisions that keep people apart? How can we together create a more just and peaceful world in which to live?

If my experience leads me and even just one other person closer to those answers, then maybe witnessing can indeed be a work of mercy.