Seven Years of Liberation Theology Class

By Rev. Geoff Browning

Professor Tom Sheehan and I have been teaching this class at Stanford on liberation theology and taking students to El Salvador and Nicaragua for the last seven years. The class began when I realized that 2010 was going to be the 30th anniversary of Archbishop Oscar Romero’s assassination in El Salvador and that the commemoration of that event coincided with Stanford’s spring break. I knew that El Salvador was so moving and powerful for the students that we realized we needed to keep offering this class every year.

Eventually we received several years of funding through the office of the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Education and the Office of Humanities. This year is the last year of that funding so the future of this class and trip is uncertain. So in celebration of the significance of this program, we are including several excerpts of appreciation that students have contributed and a few pictures.

Taking “Issues in Liberation: El Salvador” was one of the most valuable experiences during my time at Stanford. It is my deep hope that this course continues for many years to come! Stanford students have been so privileged to be able to take courses with the brilliant professors who lead this course. The kind of practical learning that comes from the trip to El Salvador is unmatched. Please continue offering this course for students. I am not exaggerating when I say this course helped make me who I am today. Cole Manley (’15)

I am writing to thank you, again, for one of the most stimulating academic experiences of my undergraduate career. “Issues in Liberation: Central America” will forever remain the course that synthesized my four years of study into a rigorous base for principled decision-making while catalyzing new intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth. The way Geoff and Abby guided our discussions was brilliant: we learned to speak from our hearts as well as our heads, without fear or embarrassment. I can’t emphasize how important every aspect of the course was. It’s a rare thing to have instructors who are also genuine advisors and mentors. Sage Behr (’16)

The class was definitely one of the most important events in my Stanford experience. I believe that it has motivated me to continue seeking social justice and to look for the underlying causes of social concerns. The class was significant because it did not only give me more academic knowledge, but also in that it challenged myself and each of us personally about what we believe is necessary to bring about a just society, and what degrees of engagement and personal commitment might be necessary for that. Zheng Ma (’17)

Whenever someone asks me about my favorite or most impactful courses that I took at Stanford, this class is always at the top of the list. I particularly remember speaking with Robert White, former American Ambassador to El Salvador, who was fired by the Reagan administration after refusing to cover up murders committed by the Salvadoran military. Former Ambassador White impressed us all with his courage, and gave us an inside look into how high-level political positions are translated into the concrete, daily ins-and-outs of diplomacy. And I will never in my life speak from our hearts as well as our heads, with out fear or embarrassment. I can’t emphasize how important every aspect of the course was. It’s a rare thing to have instructors who are also genuine advisors and mentors.

Attending worship at a Christian Base Community

Late at night but still smiling

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I have been fortunate enough during my three years at Stanford to have some incredible experiences, but this course still stands out among the rest. This class was the first – and still one of the only – times that my thoughts and perceptions of religion, international relations, and service where challenged. 

Mackenzie Yaryura ('17)

This class and the trip to Nicaragua remain one of my top memories from my Stanford experience, and played a large part in my decision to engage in social justice work after graduation. I was particularly struck by the way that visitors such as Professor Terry Karl lived their truth and engaged with causes that mattered to them. [Since I am] someone with no religious affiliation, Geoff’s calm and supportive demeanor greatly assisted my understanding and appreciation of the basis of liberation theology while in Nicaragua. The Liberation Theology course and our trip to Nicaragua constituted a critical turning point in my Stanford experience. I hope that it can continue to inspire generations of Stanford students to come. Katie Delahunt ('15)

This really should be a class that is taught in perpetuity! Shane Johnson ('16)

The “Ways to Justice” Conference

On May 5th to 7th, the Peace+Justice Studies Initiative at Stanford held its “Ways to Justice” Conference. This initiative is the effort of students, faculty and Pastor Geoff to start a peace and justice studies program at Stanford University. In 2013 we received a four-year grant to develop several courses related to peace and justice studies and to promote awareness of this initiative through conferences and events.

The conference brought together activists from the civil rights era and millennials working for Black Lives Matter, immigrant rights and others from all around the country and even from Palestine via Skype. It was a conference filled with in-depth research and theory, but also with practical, on-the-ground experience. There was a lot of wonderful discussion as well as differing opinions about tactics and the use of nonviolence vs. violence. Summarized in one or two sentences each, these are a few of the highlights:

- Nonviolence is the art of being human
- Conflict escalates when others are dehumanized
- Nonviolent campaigns are at least 50% more likely to succeed than violent campaigns (see graph)
- Nonviolent resistance movements create much more durable and peaceful democracies than those provoked by violent transitions.

Principled Nonviolence seeks to combine the ends and the means for a larger goal of a nonviolent future. It seeks to integrate deed, word, and thought in the pursuit of a more just and peaceful future.

Nonviolence and our ability to control our impulses around violence and revenge can be thought of as developing moral muscle. If we don’t practice using it, we can’t expect to be proficient when we need it.

Gandhi said: “If you think we are going to earn our freedom and then rebuild our society, you have it exactly opposite. We must rebuild our society and then we will discover our freedom.”
She doesn’t leap tall buildings with a single bound, wear spandex or even a cape. In fact, her diminutive stature would not make any bad guys shake in their boots, but make no mistake, they are very much afraid of her superpowers – so much so that they have made repeated threats on her life.

I first met Professor Terry Karl (Political Science) at a panel discussion she was hosting with several students in 2010. The purpose of the panel was to share the results of their investigation into the plot by Salvadoran military commanders to murder six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in El Salvador in 1989. Terry had obtained thousands of pages of communications between the US embassy in El Salvador and the Salvadoran military regime through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. By teaching her students how to scrutinize these documents, she and her student team not only assembled a chronology of what happened, but also found substantial evidence that might eventually lead to a conviction of some of that country’s top leaders.

While Professor Karl is primarily known for her influential work on the global politics of oil, she is also an expert in international human rights. Terry spent a lot of time in El Salvador during that country’s brutal civil war when death squads commonly left decapitated bodies in places where they would be sure to be most visible and terrorize the populace. During the civil war, she worked closely with three of the murdered priests, including the rector and vice rector of the university who were the leading scholars in Central America.

Few of us are aware of Stanford’s many connections to the country of El Salvador. Professor William Durham (Anthropology) wrote one of the most important books on El Salvador, Scarcity and Survival in Central America. Durham is one of the foremost experts on population and land use in that country and has consulted with the Salvadoran government and continues to lead alumni trips and conduct research there.

Professor Tom Sheehan (Religious Studies) also spent a lot of time in El Salvador during the civil war while writing articles for the NY Times and other publications. Like Terry Karl, he knew each of the priests who were assassinated and was particularly close to Rector Ignacio Ellacuria, a brilliant scholar and theologian. And since 2010, Prof. Sheehan has taught a class and led a trip to Central America that explores the political, religious and socio-economic concerns of that region. (See our article: Seven Years of Liberation Theology)

However, the most notable and yet least known connection is that days before the murders, Professor Karl became convinced that the priests were in mortal danger and persuaded Stanford to offer them visiting professorships. Terry called the priests to urge them to immediately leave the country and come to Stanford. A mere two days later, they were dragged from their beds and executed.

Once Professor Karl and her students had assembled their evidence, she and several students flew to Spain where they presented their evidence to the Spanish court because five of the six murdered priests were Spanish citizens. As a result of this work, Spain has issued indictments against 20 Salvadoran military commanders they believe are implicated by this evidence. One of those commanders, Colonel Inocente Montano, is currently in US custody and a judge has approved his extradition to Spain, though Montano is appealing that extradition order. If he is extradited to Spain, he will be the first person to stand trial for these murders and the highest-ranking Salvadoran officer ever criminally tried for human rights abuses in that country’s bloody repression.

Professor Karl’s work over the years has resulted in three successful civil suits, deportations, extradition and criminal indictments including the first jury verdict in U.S. history to find war generals guilty of crimes against humanity under the doctrine of command responsibility. She has been such a powerful expert witness that few defense attorneys dare to challenge her. But this has also made her the target of threats and intimidation. Nevertheless, like any good superhero, she is relentless in her pursuit of justice on behalf of those who have suffered, many of whom were her friends.

But this story is not over. Karl’s former students now staff major human rights organizations all over the world. She continues to get new cases and needs the assistance of students who want to work on real-life murder mysteries. These students are learning what it means to be global citizens and will become the next generation of superheroes. Thank you Prof. Terry Karl.
Queerituality and Jesus

By Rev. Gregory Stevens

Each week this quarter Queerituality has brought a group of queer* students from a variety of traditions to the table – Mormon, Lutheran, post-Evangelical, Baptist, Catholic, and a host of other Christian identities - to wrestle with how our various traditions have responded and how they might respond in the future to the full inclusion of queer people.

To frame our conversation we chose to study Rabbi Mychal Copeland’s newly edited text, Struggling in Good Faith, an exploration of 13 North American religious perspectives on queer inclusion. It is no secret that queer people have lived in oppression and fear within religious communities for centuries, making this specific discussion of our liberation quite invigorating. The ideas most striking to me occurred in our conversations around the stories of Jesus in our gospel testaments: we came to discover Jesus as queer. The gospels portray Jesus as a homeless Jewish prophet who spoke truth to power, embodied peace with justice, and was assassinated by the state.

The gospels exalt Jesus’ ministry to the poor, marginalized, and oppressed to the highest place of glory and honor; they seat a homeless love-radical at the right hand of God calling him Christ the King. It is here that our discussions came to life most vividly, as we realized the marginalized people Jesus laid down his life for are the same as today’s queers. For many years it has been embarrassing to claim both Christian and queer identity, but through Queerituality we are beginning to realize together that Jesus himself stood with and for queers in the 1st century and the 21st century.

Out of our shared experiences of exclusion and inclusion expressed in Queerituality, we are able to queer the church toward radical inclusion of all people marginalized, oppressed, and queer: Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Straight but not Narrow, Asexual, Two-Spirited, Pan-sexual, Intersex, and all other variations of sexuality that the church has historically said NO to. It is time to reclaim our sexualities, for in doing so we reclaim our bodies, the Body, Christ's Body. In reclaiming our sexuality, we reclaim the Church as the Body of Christ ready to transform the world with Love.

*Queer is a reclaimed word of unification for all those targeted by prejudice and injustice based on their sexuality or gender identity.

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