

Remembering Michelle

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June 16, 2015

The Mayas have a legend about the *quetzal*—the *silent* red, blue, and green bird that is the symbol of Guatemala. The legend says that the quetzal lost its voice when the Spaniards arrived and slaughtered 30,000 Mayans. In her book, *Voices of the Voiceless*, Michelle wrote that, like the quetzal, too many *people* have been voiceless — the poor, indigenous people, women, workers, refugees...ⁱ

Today, I want to talk about one of the great gifts Michelle gave her world as a scholar-activist: Her life's work was to amplify unheard voices.

In the 80s, Michelle was teaching children of migrants at a Spanish church in Texas. One night when INS raids closed the school, she heard, for the first time, the stories of desperation in Central America that drove these immigrants northward.

Five years later she was in Guatemala visiting a weaving and gardening cooperative for widows. And the strong voices of Mayan women educated her about the military attacks that had killed husbands and fathers and sons. *She was changed by these voices.*ⁱⁱ

Her whole life was about listening *carefully*—and ensuring that others were listening too. With Michelle, *the quetzal found its voice.*

With Witness for Peace, she led delegations to Guatemala and Colombia, Haiti, Mexico, and Nicaragua—so North Americans could hear the stories of unheard neighbors. My first trip to Nicaragua was led by Michelle. After we heard the stories of villagers affected by the U.S. Contra war and IMF policies, she prepared us for a session at the U.S. Embassy, and then on to the halls of Congress, so Nicaraguan voices would be heard in the corridors of power, exposing the truth, building peace.

Michelle's first published work examined women's movements in Guatemala as the grounding for a theory of justice derived from a deep understanding of *injustice*.ⁱⁱⁱ Her writing and teaching unmasked the powerlessness of the powerful, and made known empowered voices from the margins.

The story of her work for justice is remarkable; we all wondered how she did it all—from work in communities of refuge on the U.S.-Mexico border, to conflict resolution in Nagaland, India; guiding Model Africa Union; serving on the national boards of Witness for Peace and Bread for the World; living in a threatened village in Chiapas as a human rights observer, or making the voices of victims *présenté* at the gates of the base in Georgia where their killers were trained.

While we were in seminary in Louisville, I got to know Michelle at Jeff Street Baptist Community, where she served as our minister to the homeless, providing hospitality to men and women who responded with gratitude to her attentive respect.

Twenty-five years later, her final research project gave voice to families displaced from the housing project across the street from that church. Her research skills were impressive, of course, but she never lost sight of why she was doing this:

One day, we interviewed an elderly woman who'd been relocated to a housing project where she felt lost and alone, merely another obstacle to the city's urban development plan. As we left her apartment, she showed us, with pride, some flowers she had planted outside her door.

That Saturday, the week's academic work finished, Michelle showed up at that door with pots of flowers to plant. And the two of them created a garden. *This was Michelle*—always planting seeds with the confident hope of future blossoming. And when that research was published, neglected voices spoke out in its pages.

Michelle refused to deny the world's brokenness. But her inner vision of *shalom* was so deep that it became the divine reality out of which she lived. So the "gloom became like the noonday." And Michelle blossomed among us "like a well-watered garden, with a spring that never runs dry."

Even the hospitality of her home reflected her vision of *justice*, where all are welcomed and gifted with food and grace and laughter.

In the end, it was Michelle who lost her voice. But in the great economy of grace, it's no accident that in these last months, *voices came from everywhere* — voices that thanked Michelle for teaching and modeling that changed lives; voices of advocates who learned from her, confirming that the call to justice in the halls of power will continue to make a difference; and voices that sang around the bedside of this one who had spoken for so many. *Voices of the voiceless...*

Of course, the quetzal *does* sing out in the resplendent beauty of what it *displays* — just as Michelle graced us with the **warm red of laughter**, the **deep blue of wellsprings of hope**, and the **rich green of peace and justice**. *Michelle, you brought such color to our world...*
Thank you, dear friend, and thanks be to God.

ⁱ Michelle Tooley, *Voices of the Voiceless: Women, Justice, and Human Rights in Guatemala* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997). Michelle recounts the legend of the quetzal on p. 19.

ⁱⁱ *Voices of the Voiceless*, 14-15.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Voices of the Voiceless*, Chapter 5. The foundation was a narrative- and praxis-based understanding of systemic injustice and of empowered responses to domination. It came from a practice of listening.