

Notes from El Salvador by Starhawk

In January 1999, four members of the Reclaiming Community traveled to El Salvador to work with Marta Benavides. Marta, who has attended MidAtlantic and California Witchamps, is involved in sustainable agriculture in her home country. Starhawk reports on the journey.

In El Salvador, it's easy to believe that automobiles are actually an alien life form, terra-forming the Earth into their ideal habitat. Gas stations are palatial: enormous, shiny, complete with food marts dispensing Coke and Oreos and Ritz Crackers and other familiar U.S. brands. Roads are new and smooth surfaced, lined with the tin and plastic shacks that still serve as habitation for mere human beings.

I've come to El Salvador with three of the main organizers of Reclaiming's Circle of Love, our project of support for sustainability work in this country. Sarah, Cheryl, Marilyn and I made this journey for the first time two years ago. Trish, a journalist, and Kate, a student, are the other members of our group.

Hermana Alicia is a warm, smiling, plump woman in her fifties who is Marta's neighbor. She does the cooking for our group, and we visit her house, which is typical of rural El Salvador—an adobe rectangle with a tin roof, a few tiny rooms partitioned off inside. The more affluent have tile floors and an indoor stove; the very poor cook outside on a small woodstove. The yard contains a well, a sink for washing dishes, a *pila* (a cement cistern for storing water) and an outhouse. Hermana Alicia has no formal education—in fact she cannot read or write. Her daughters, however, are both university students and professionals—one a school principal, one a psychologist. They are both in their twenties, and still live at home. Their careers are not passports to great wealth: in El Salvador,



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a school principal may make two hundred dollars a month. This is better than the unlivable wages paid by the *maquilas*—the factories that turn out much of the mass-market clothing and goods we buy so inexpensively here in the U.S. The *maquilas* pay their workers about four dollars a day.

With encouragement from Marta, Hermana Alicia has turned her yard into a beautiful garden, filled with colorful blossoms, medicinal plants and tropical fruits. As fellow gardeners, we are kindred spirits. Everywhere we go, Hermana Alicia has her eye out for plants—collecting a few seeds here, a snip of a cutting there, or an orchid plucked from a tree branch. I aid and abet her whenever I can. “Stolen plants grow better,” I assure her.

Marta often has young people staying at her house in order to attend trainings or to go to school when they live in outlying communities. In the port town of Acajutla, we visit the small colony where two of the boys come from. Valdemar, who is just eighteen, has built his mother a house to replace the tacked-together tin shack they'd lived in before. With Marta's support, he took out a loan that paid for adobe bricks. In three months, he built a classic small house with a few variations that make for light and air and beauty: wide doors to let in the breeze, a covered



porch with hanging plants, a small table and chairs for eating outside. Chickens run through the yard and occasionally wander into the house; Valdemar's mother shoos them off the table and laughs as she gives us a dozen fresh eggs.

"Isaiah's house is next," Marta tells us, as we pass the makeshift shelter of tacked-together pieces of tin roofing that currently houses his family.

Vidal, who is seventeen, wants to go to school. His father wants him to go to the fields and cut sugar cane and bring home some money. They fight all the time, and Vidal escapes to Marta's house threatening to run away, to walk across Mexico and sneak over the border to the U.S. Whenever I leave my English/Spanish dictionary lying around, I catch him reading it.

In El Salvador, class background is clearly evident in sheer height. Middle- and upper- class people are tall; the *campesinos* are easily six inches shorter than the average person from the U.S., and the very poor and indigenous people are tiny. They remind me of my own grandparents. My grandmother stood four feet eleven. She grew up extremely poor in a little Russian *shetel* not much different from these villages, and like Hermana Alicia, she loved to garden. My grandfather was not much taller. Their sons were all nearly six feet tall and their grandsons over six feet.

We have brought fairy wings and face paints to the Peace and Sustainability Fair that Marta has helped to organize in a park in San Salvador. In Marta's view, a certain level of zaniness has revolutionary import—it shakes people up, makes them look at the world in a new way, opens them up to desire for a better life. We set out the paints and a young woman who has been tending the solar-oven display comes over to look at what we're doing. She asks what the face paints are and we tell her. "Why?" she asks, obviously puzzled. "It's fun," I say, "and a celebration of life." "How much does it cost?" "It's free." She asks for a butterfly. People begin to drift over, bringing their children. Butterflies are very popular, as are flowers and hearts. As the park fills up, the rush is on. A folkloric band is playing next to us and it gets harder and harder to hear. We are surrounded by eager children

waiting for their piece of wearable art. Luckily *mariposa*, *flor* and *corazón* are easy to understand and to execute, but some of the young boys have more complex desires. I am asked to reproduce a T-shirt design. A teenage boy I secretly have pegged as Most Likely Gang Member asks me for a dove of peace. And finally, there's the young boy who wants "God in colors on my arm." I have to check with my friend Rolando to be sure I'm understanding the Spanish. "*Yo no soy Michelangelo!*" I protest, and proceed to give him a rainbow and something resembling the face of Jesus.

Hermano Catalino and his wife Cristina are tiny people. They have five children and she is pregnant again. They live now on the small farm on the outskirts of San Salvador that belongs to Marta's family. Her mother had developed it into a small paradise of fruit trees, coconut palms, lush jungle and gardens—their retreat from the city. During the war, the FMLN took it over as a base. But unfortunately, conserving the land and cherishing the gardens were not high on their priority lists, and now many of the trees have died and the soil has eroded terribly. Marta is trying to develop it into a permaculture demonstration garden and environmental education center.

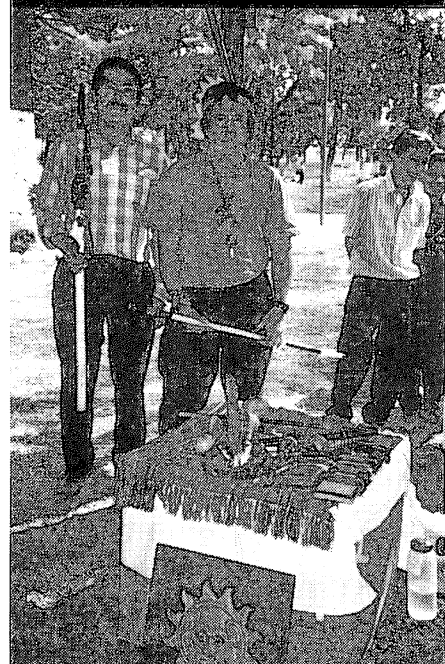
Hermano Catalino and Cristina are originally from the eastern part of El Salvador. Displaced by the war, they were part of one of the cooperatives Marta has been working with. When they accepted the job of caretaking the farm, Marta rented a truck to help them move. When the truck arrived, they had virtually nothing to put in it. The house at the farm is newly painted. The main room is empty except for a few hooks for hammocks that are taken down during the day. In a back room, the rest of their possessions are stored in a few plastic bags on the floor. A few chairs, some cooking pots and cheap plastic dishes complete their worldly goods.

My greatest personal achievement was to give a morning's introduction to permaculture in Spanish to an audience that ranged from Hermano Catalino to a professor of agriculture at the university. I hoped the university professors would

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Support Permaculture in El Salvador through the Circle of Love

The Circle of Love provides an opportunity to help the Earth through support for sustainability and cultural development in El Salvador. Become a member of the Circle of Love by pledging \$100 a year. For more information, write Reclaiming/MidAtlantic Community, P.O. Box 7151, Lancaster, PA 17603 or call (717) 390-0321.



PHOTOGRAPHS, OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP: The Circle of Love group in El Salvador; painting faces at the Peace and Sustainability Fair in San Salvador; Starhawk drawing water from the well at the Permaculture Farm (and dreaming of a solar pump!); Hermana Alicia and her daughters at the Peace and Sustainability Fair in San Salvador. Photos by Starhawk.

THIS PAGE: Chac (wearing the headband), a Mayan artist specializing in Shamanic tools and images, displaying his work at the Peace Fair. Photo by Sarah Campbell.

