Mural in El Salvador of Archbishop Oscar Romero surrounded by his beloved people, bearing on their hands the stigmata wounds of the crucified Christ, the wounds of a crucified people.

Touching Hope

By Jean Stokan
Jean Stokan is Director of the Justice Team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in Washington, DC. She has worked on human rights in Latin America, immigration reform, and federal budget priorities to ensure support for vulnerable communities. Her work includes direct advocacy on Capitol Hill, public witness activities, and engaging grassroots faith constituencies on these issues.

Previously, she served on the national staff of Pax Christi USA, promoting nonviolent alternatives to war, and served as Policy Director for the SHARE Foundation, leading delegations to El Salvador and fostering people-to-people solidarity. She is married to Scott Wright and has a daughter, Maura Stokan-Wright. They lived for several years in Assisi Community, a community of lay and religious committed to simple lifestyle and social justice concerns.

“As difficult as confronting injustice can be, I do believe ours is a work of love. The greatest of gifts is to feel as one, in communion with people all over this globe, past, present, and to come, who have dedicated their lives to justice.”

- Jean Stokan
Way too much moves me at levels deep. The wounds of this world can be overwhelming if one’s eyes are wide open to the massive suffering of those made poor, and the spiraling violence and racism destroying precious lives all over the globe, including in our own city streets. I’ve worked in inner city housing projects and in rural Appalachia; I have been to Hiroshima and Nagasaki; during the war years in El Salvador, I took religious delegations to sites of massacres perpetrated by U.S. funded security forces. Today, my email inbox is stuffed with reports of human rights violations from Honduras, death squads and all.

The litany goes on. Suffice it to say that I’ve wept buckets. My response is usually to work around the clock in hopes of making some difference in building a more just and peace-filled world. Advocacy, organizing and activism consume me. Yet every now and then a graced moment comes—a touch of the Divine—reminding me that while such frenzied activity is important, other pathways are opened by tenderness and “things of the heart.”

Poetry has become my form of praying into an alternative way of doing social justice. Often, late at night, so haunted by the world’s pain that I cannot sleep, my hope for change grows thin and I simply have to write a poem. It’s cathartic; like being in labor, something has to come out of me. It’s also prayer in that I’m challenged to look beyond what I am doing with my two hands, alone. And occasionally, like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, some wisdom comes in the final line of the poem.

Poetry is born in the caverns of the human heart, pausing before that which yearns. Poetry can contribute to social justice when it moves others’ hearts, wakes people up to the world around them, stirs the moral imagination, or kindles the embers of hope. Advocacy and activism are critical, but I’m ever more convinced that flooding the world with compassion is far more urgently needed. Nothing less than a continental shift of our nation’s soul is needed at the deep level of values, and of human consciousness around our oneness. Whether it’s through poetry, music, or listening to stories, putting one’s finger in the wounds of this world can break the heart, but therein lies our mission.

Most of my poems are unfinished. I usually do not allow myself the luxury of time to polish the writing or tighten an image. I scribble just enough to be able to get up and go back out into the world, with some measure of added strength, and a sense of the Holy. Below are such scribblings, categorized by my recurrent prayer themes, and followed by an offering of questions for reflection.

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1. Drawing Close to Places of Suffering

A host of my poems are written at the foot of the cross. Whether one physically draws close to the excluded of the world, or opens the newspapers to pictures of the torrent of suffering from Syria to Ferguson, the bloodied faces of Christ are everywhere, calling out. I often write poems while listening to late night BBC news or staring at a picture from the day’s newspaper, my eyes sore with weeping. When possible, however, I try to physically draw close. A few days after 9-11, my husband (Scott Wright), our 3 year-old daughter (Maura) and I went by train to New York for a day, the smoke from the flames still thick in the air. The fences around Union Square became a people’s monument to the dead and missing, full of pictures of beloveds, flowers woven around them, candles on the ground. The poem I wrote, “Prayer in Front of a Thousand Candles,” became the seed of a journey that led me to quit my work and eventually join the national staff of Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement.

While there is a place for putting firewalls around one’s heart, I am not very good at it. The following was from my journal in June 2009, when I was blessed to have an opportunity to visit the Sisters of Mercy ministries in the slum areas of Colon, Panama.

The Slums of Panama

I forgot how much poverty smells
   Like urine.

   Children playing amidst sewage everywhere
   We tip toe ’cross puddles with great care
      while a line of girls rushes past, not looking where their feet step
      young lives way too accustomed to urined paths
         and the stench that hangs thick.

I forgot how much poverty looks
   Like vacant stares of mothers with child.

   Tiny cubicles as homes, no running water, no toilets
   A block away, the barrio’s communal bathroom is tucked in a darkened cement corridor:
      two toilets, two showers
         for dozens of families.

   What does a mother do in the middle of night
      If her child burns with fever, or gets diarrhea?
   Does she risk dark alleys and bullets to make her way to the communal bathroom?
   Or does she weep in silent desperation?
   These questions would be my very own
      except for where I was born.
As we ascend the mini-bus to return to our zone
of comfort
A torrential rainstorm breaks out
not unlike the weeping going on in my soul.
I look back and wonder about los excluidos, the excluded ones of Colon
in the rainy season
soaked and sandwiched dense in their cubicles.

I hate being this close up to poverty
afraid I’ll lose hope again.

I hate that I’ll be haunted for months to come
surrounded each night at my dinner table
with mirages of starving children and vacant-eyed mothers
who want to sit down with me, in me
and have long conversations.

I hate this geographic place of prayer, God, where you keep putting me
standing once again
at the foot of the cross
destined to look up at your Crucified face.

Yet, I choose to linger in this prayer location
Knowing full well
there’s no other place to be.
Trusting that something of You is happening here
I genuflect
and kiss this Holy Ground.

**Reflection:** You might want to find a picture or story in the newspaper or
online that graphically captures the unjust suffering of people, or of Earth.
Imagine yourself standing at the foot of the cross of that pain:

- What is hardest about seeing or hearing stories of such suffering? What
  most breaks your heart? Linger there.
- Where do you find God in it all?
- How might you help others draw close to the wounds of the world, so
  as to stir greater compassion?
2. Who Will Wake Up the People?

Another theme in my poems is how to live with totally different views of reality, that which social justice advocates see and victims of oppression feel, contrasted with what mass culture portrays.

*I Too Grieve* was written in April 1995 following the Oklahoma City bombing, when a homemade bomb went off in a federal building with a day care center. The first reports, later proved false, alleged that a terrorist act might have been carried out by a “Middle Eastern man.” It inflamed anger such that the home of a Middle Eastern woman was attacked; and as the woman fled to her cellar, she bled out with a miscarriage. I had been to El Salvador and once visited the civilian community of Corral de Piedra in which four children were killed days before by the U.S. backed regime. I picked up a tuft of hair, as well as bullet casings “made in the USA.” A bit long, this writing to contrast perceived realities was definitely catharsis, more than a tight poem.

*I Too Grieve*

I too grieve.

I grieve for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing
My tears are real, the weight on my chest heavy.

Yet multiply this by 100 more bombs, thousands
and glimpse what we did in just one day of the (first) Gulf war
to other day care centers, and hospitals
estimates of 200,000 dead from the war and its aftermath
women and children.

Reporters were banned, pictures forbidden.
They learned from Vietnam that body bags each night on the TV news
stir the U.S. public
so we only saw fireworks and clean stealth computer games.
Iraqi children are children too.
Who are the terrorists?

In Guatemala, 200,000 indigenous people were killed since the 1954 CIA-backed coup
to help United Fruit keep land that peasants needed; 440 villages wiped off the map.
Who do you think propped up death squads in Haiti?
And in Vietnam, mines left by the U.S. are still exploding, tearing children apart.
How long will we relegate “terrorism” to acts of a few individuals not nations who wage war? not nations who train torturers?
If we want to concern ourselves with terrorist prevention why do we focus only on fancy security technology, tighter borders, more FBI surveillance --instead of an examination of conscience?

What about our foreign policies to advance U.S. business interests abroad at the expense of millions of Third World poor who die in silence, from hunger, repression and war.
How long will we deny the blood on our hands the self-centered plundering of all the resources we can get for us alone at any cost.

Why are we surprised that terrorism has hit home?

Oklahoma City
an evil so great on this soil that some believe it’s a sign of the Last Days.
Well what do you think it’s been like living in Iraq, or Guatemala? for those who are made poor?

I grieve
I too grieve for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing
My tears are real, the weight on my chest heavy.

It’s not the first time
I grieve so.

Another experience of the clash between two versions of reality gave rise to “Their Bullets Look Different.” I wrote it in 1997, five years after the war ended in El Salvador. I had gone to a State Department forum, my way of trying to build relationships with officials and hear their points of view. They were celebrating all the progress in the country, signaling to investors that El Salvador was “open for business.” I left in anger. The night before, we received in our home a woman from El Salvador who came up for treatment, suffering from the effects of being tortured ten years prior. Sharing her story, we both wept most of that sleepless night.

**Their Bullets Look Different**

They smile, so clean in this State Department
Talking of free trade, markets opening.
The saliva of profit drips from their lips.
Exports are booming; record salaries for CEOs.

But I know what this language means. It means that in El Salvador you can buy Iowa corn cheaper than what’s produced by your neighbor campesinos, who no longer can even subsist.
It means that outside the sweatshops in Honduras
are empty sheets from birth control pills forced upon women daily
so a pregnancy doesn’t slow the work.

I’ve held the hand of a woman whose maquila boss beat her
til her baby bled out.

Globalization, free markets, liberalizing economies—these fancy, glorious, patriotic words.
But this is the language of crushing people
Robbing the hope from the young
Robbing the poor of their lives.

This language means that hands are ‘round the necks of Third World babies
as they squeeze and squeeze, babies too weak to whimper
and it’s all so clean, hidden.

The bullets look different this time.

Who hears the last breath of a malnourished child?
Who notices the sunken eyes of the millions of the expendable ones?

Desperation is shrieking
screaming at us
screaming
silently.

Who will wake the people up?
How will we remove the fingers from the babies’ necks?

We must wake the people up
We must.
We must.

**Reflection:** In light of the massive social injustices and spiraling violence in our world:

- When you experience the dissonance in how you see the world, compared to others, what helps you hold onto your core?
- Knowing that building community with other like-minded justice seekers helps sustain us, how might you more mindfully tend to that need in you? How might you invite people new to the work of justice into your friendship circles?
- What ways of “waking the people up” to social injustice do you find most effective for you?
3. Making Sacred the Lives Lost

“Black Lives Matter,” the mantra of the movement that rose up following the recent news coverage of the spate of killings of unarmed African-American men, captures the preciousness of every life, and the reverence it deserves. It’s a cry to dismantle the entrenched structures of racism and white privilege that have fractured the human community, and not embraced each life as sacred.

Despite all our efforts to end racism, reverse deepening inequality and stop wars, people continue to suffer and die unnecessarily in numbers too hard to take in. In the lead up to the launch of war on Iraq in March 2003, I spent day and night for many months working with Pax Christi members, together with people of good will all over the globe, trying to prevent that war. The following poem, written on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, reflects how desperate we felt as it became clear that we would not be able to stop the war.

**On the Brink of War on Iraq**

Where is this Christ in the manger?
I see no hope born here
All this talk of the long view
doesn’t work for newborns already deformed by depleted uranium from the first Gulf war or those bracing for shrapnel soon to slice them in half.

Where is this Christ in the manger?
No swaddling clothes here
only shrouds waiting to be robed.

Where are the shepherds with their horns?
I only hear soldiers playing revelries.

In the middle of Christmas
I, one more woman wailing on the Way of the Cross,
will be a Veronica to soak in, and hold up His bleeding Face.

O Children of Iraq
born in the manger
Herod’s fire-breathing empire, poised to slice you in half
what more can we do now to stop him?

Perhaps just to hold up your face
Forever, we will hold up your face.
Reflection: The prayer image of being Veronica’s veil, holding up the faces of war and violence, helps me both to reverence each life lost or destroyed, and to bring redemptive meaning to that life. Each precious life lost in war—innocent civilians and soldiers on all sides—can strengthen the cry of Pope Paul VI, repeated many times since, saying “war never again.” In reflecting on the Paschal mystery:

- What losses have you known personally, or stories of lives destroyed by injustice that reside in your heart?
- How do you make sacred and breathe the life of resurrection into those lives?

4. Changing Prayer Position: From the Foot of the Cross to Resurrection

Sustaining ourselves in the long-term work of social justice matters. Although I don’t remember to draw on them often enough, prayer responses have come in graced moments that challenge me to look beyond what I can do with my own two hands, and to remember to shift my prayer position: from weeping alone at the foot of the cross, to linking arms in community, facing Holy Saturday’s stone with expectation.

In Chambers Deep

Weeping goes on, in chambers deep.
My tears, a rainforest
where somehow pain seems sacred
and consecrates into the holy.

God waits.
She sits at the entrance to lift broken
bodies and starving children
from my arms.
She assures me She will
Kiss them
while I go deep inside.

She will make the dried blood and martyrs bones
bubble with life
once I give them over to her
IF I give them to her.

She whispers, if I but listen,
that joy will rise
somewhere, in another chamber
down deep.
In January

The weight of the world, like venom in my veins
wrestles me down
again.

Like the barren tree through winter
pain must simply be borne
the steep cost of an open heart.

Like the defiance of that winter tree
Hope pulses in the smallest remnants of love.

Blossoms, and the first crocuses resurrect in February.
Some shift in our world’s transformation
will come
in time.

The forsythias beckon me.

The following poem was written after listening to Lorena’s testimony of unimaginable suffering in the war in El Salvador, and being inspired by her courage to stand up to injustice. I learned what it means to comingle tears in a chalice.

Chalice

I will rock my pierced heart
sing songs of Lorena’s tears, wade in them
Her wounds drew me in even further to this fertile land drenched in blood
and pulled strength forward.

Something sacred happens when you rock and hold the body of Christ,
When you hold up the body of Christ
and remember.

Something sacred happens when you share pain and touch the open wound
when you kiss it
and draw so close to the other
that your tears fall into the same cup
and transform.

Is this what solidarity means?
Love and tenderness falling into a chalice?

Yes, this is what the “work” of social justice is really all about:
Reflection: Tenderness too often gets lost in our activist world. Before her death in Auschwitz in 1943, Etty Hillesum wrote of her time in Westerbork, preparing people to board the trains for the death camps. She wrote in her diary of trying to love everyone with all the tenderness possible. Once she fell to her knees when passing a patch of flowers in the street. While on the transport train to her death, she slid a note out through the wooden planks, addressed to her friend, which later became an epilogue to her diary. It said, “we left the camp singing.”

• What do you most need to sustain yourself in the long-term work of building a more just and peace-filled world?
• How do you nurture beauty or tenderness in your work for social justice?
• Do you have a recurrent “prayer position” or theme as you journey in your vocation to peace-making and justice-building?

In Closing. Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton wrote, “my veins do not end inside me, but in the unanimous blood of those who struggle...for life, love...and bread, the poetry of everyone.” As difficult as confronting injustice can be, I do believe ours is a work of love. The greatest of gifts is to feel as one--in communion with people all over this globe, past, present, and to come, who have dedicated their lives to justice. If our movements are to grow, we must learn to touch hearts and inspire hope in a way that says, “We invite you to join us; together, we can bring about the social change so desperately needed.” Our collective passions, joined in the crucible, can truly transform the face of the earth. A deep bow to all who yearn and struggle for this as well.