



christian peacemaker teams

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Letter from the editor

When I first joined the Colombia team, friends and family asked me what CPT's work on the ground looked like. I would say, "we accompany partners." Then they would ask, "What do you mean by accompany?" "Being present physically and politically with our partners in their struggle for justice," is how I usually would respond. Just like them, you might ask me for an example.

What is accompaniment, and how is it central in CPT's work? In this issue, we want to share a few examples, and along the way, take you with us in our growth as an organization. Our mission has changed from "Getting in the way" to "Building partnerships to transform oppression and violence" over our near 35 years of accompaniment work. We have learned our lessons, our tactics have improved, and our understanding of how conflict and oppression function and thrive in the world has deepened. Yes, we read books, reflected on our experiences, consulted colleagues, but the wisest teachers we have had were our partners—the people we accompany. Accompaniment is a partnership; it is about listening to those most deeply affected by oppression and collaborating with them in their struggle for liberation. Accompaniment is impossible without understanding our own privilege; if not, we would consider ourselves saviors, a logic reserved for a binary world of superheroes and villains. The struggles and

dreams of liberation are tangible and political, not the electoral politics kind of politics, but a rearrangement of power. Lila Watson, an Aboriginal visual artist, and activist clearly lays out a framework for accompaniment:

*If you have come
To help me
You are wasting
Your time,
But
If you have come
Because
Your liberation
Is bound up
With mine
Then let us work together.*

If you have ever considered getting involved with CPT, but for some reason or the other have been unable, this is your chance. COVID 19 has changed the way we do accompaniment. You, most likely, like us, have had to adapt to a new rhythm. We have had to reimagine what accompaniment looks like in a virtual world, where our partners don't have access to the internet, and where assassinations, bombings, and forced displacement occur in a physical realm. This is our challenge. I invite you to read along and consider joining us for a webinar or an online action.

In kindness,

Caldwell Manners
Communications Coordinator



Cover illustration by Julie Brown

Creating this piece led me to explore my perception of CPT accompaniment more deeply. The background and main image depict the stereotypical views of the work of accompaniment. The photos within the raised fist are of our partners, advisors, CPTers, and other people who complete the picture of this dynamic process of partnership. Accompaniment is an intertwined collection of people working for change in our complicated and often violent world.

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Over the last three months, we have received tremendous support for our previous issue that unapologetically declared, "Black Lives Matter." There were others, though, who questioned our decision as "phony" or "Marxist," or wrote to us in all caps, "all lives matter." For CPT, our commitment to challenge anti-Blackness and to support the leadership of Black movements for liberation is intrinsically tied with our mission of building partnerships to transform oppression and violence.

We want to invite you to imagine and work with us toward a world that values Black lives. We need to step away from the fear-based question of, "But how...?" to the questions of possibilities, of "What?" and "Who?" Asking, "But how will defunding the police work?" or,

"But how will the public feel safe?" closes us to the possibilities outside of the status quo. When we ask, "What will make the public feel safe?" "Who is the public?" or "What will defunding the police do and whom does that impact?" it allows us to question the basic premise of policing. We need to move away from questions veiling conversations that do not challenge systemic racism, and what the status quo views as the legitimate and violent forces that uphold it.

To build a just and equal world, we need to defund these forces. My liberation and your liberation are tightly woven together in the fabric of collective liberation. We can't have a world built on the oppression of the other. Right now, the only world worth building is one where Black Lives Matter. ■

27 Years a CPTer

By Kryss Chupp

From the late 1980s, CPT sent short-term delegations to support local peacemakers around the world. However, by October 1993, the very first month-long training for CPT's newly formed Peacemaker Corps was held in Chicago. And Kathy Kern was there. As a founding member of the Corps, Kathy served on teams that provided full-time accompaniment for CPT's partners in Haiti, Palestine, Chiapas, Colombia and many other program sites.

Her first assignment in Haiti pre-dated the age of digital cameras and high-speed internet. Cell phones and "Social Media" did not exist. Yet from day one, Kathy collected, documented, edited, and transmitted the stories of our partners' resistance to violence and oppression.

Her first-hand experience working directly with CPT's partners and team members gave

Kathy unique grounding for all the writing and editing she did over the course of 27 years of service with CPT. When someone said that CPT should document its history, everyone looked to Kathy, and "In Harm's Way" – the story of CPT's first 20 years – was born. Not surprisingly, there was more to tell than could fit between the covers of one book. So Kathy went on to write "As Resident Aliens" about CPT's longest running presence in Palestine, which started in 1995 and continues to this day.

Kathy edited CPTnet – our email news service – since its inception. When social media platforms hit the scene, she embraced the challenge of learning the technology and managing CPT's presence on

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

Kathy, as you prepare to retire from CPT – but never from peacemaking – we honor your steadfast dedication and the depth and breadth of your contributions to this experiment in nonviolence. Thank you, Kathy! We will miss you! And we will never forget the lessons you taught us about "passive voice." ■



Virtual Accompaniment

By Milena Rincón



A few months ago, I would never have imagined I would hear two partners sharing their experiences and struggles by only making a click! During the last months, our partners have witnessed how our physical accompaniment and presence, so meaningful and vital for their justice and peace efforts, have been abruptly transformed by a form of accompaniment from a distance. A “click” is now the entrance key to our partners’ homes, struggles, and requests for a better life.

During the last six months, CPT’s accompaniment has been limited to listening to our partners’ stories, challenges, and demands. Missing is the warm welcome to their homes and offerings of fresh lemonade, tea, or coffee. Without a doubt, each of our partners and our teams has deeply missed those moments. We all look forward to renewing our visits and enjoying the feeling only old friends can experience when they meet again.

Since its creation, CPT has experienced

critical and growing moments. This current crisis is again an invitation to think about the most effective forms of accompanying our partners in each one of CPT’s locations. The process of thinking about accompaniment has allowed us to see what our strengths as an organization are and what new horizons we

not doubted its mission for a second. Our partners have reaffirmed how important it is to continue creatively accompanying them. We cannot leave them alone. Their lives and the lives of millions continue to be deeply impacted by oppressive and violent structures taking away all opportunities. Our partners continue asking that their lives and human rights be respected and guaranteed. For CPT to accompany our partners has involved increasing intentional communication with them and our supporters, and increasing advocacy work. Our partners’ voices must be heard. This work—making their struggle

To continue accompanying in solidarity, to transform through liberating love. CPT has not doubted its mission for a second. Our partners have reaffirmed how important it is to continue creatively accompanying them.

can see, in a world that insists on telling us there are no horizons.

Two decades ago, as CPT, we experienced a transformation of our protective accompaniment concept. We moved from foreign team members with passport privilege doing “overseas” work towards establishing accompaniment teams formed by nationals and foreign CPTers. CPT acknowledged the positive impact it has had on the accompanied communities and organizations, to see nationals and foreigners working together and supporting their struggles. This strategy was received, at the beginning, with some uncertainty by our partners, but time allowed CPT to enrich its work and our partners to increase their trust in the commitment of CPT’s accompaniment.

More than one decade ago, CPT radically changed its accompaniment approach as a result of an in-depth, long, and critical reflection process about its role as an organization. Acknowledging that our work to support different groups and organization initiatives was based on our privilege, CPT decided to become an organization that, together with those accompanied by us, would intentionally create and support strategies to transform the violence and oppression affecting our partners.

For 35 years, we have not only been transformed by our partners, we have and continue to be transformed by new generations of CPTers reflecting the rich diversity of the human family in solidarity and accompaniment work.

So, what does the current context invite us to do? To continue accompanying in solidarity, to transform through liberating love. CPT has

visible, communicating, and advocating for change as part of our accompaniment—needs You. They and CPT need your support, which can include reading our publications, joining our webinars, participating in the urgent actions and campaigns, reposting our communications, and liking them. What seem like simple actions – just one click! – are the actions that allow CPT and its partners in the United States, Palestine, Iraqi Kurdistan, Greece, Colombia, and Canada to continue working with strength and hope. Our partners are not alone. This solidarity is our core value as accompaniers.

During these times of physical distancing, our partners keep showing their powerful and radical resilience and strength and their hope for a different world. They keep inviting us to be part of a radical transformation, either by sharing a drink when we visit them or by joining CPT’s webinars. Our partners continue resisting the Turkish army bombing of their homes and lands in northern Iraq; challenging the Israeli military occupation aiming to destroy and disappear them; surviving humiliating and confined living conditions while they search for a better life in Greece and United States; asking their ancestral rights as First Nations to be respected and the treaties being honored by Turtle Island (Canada and U.S.) authorities; defending their lives and their territories in Colombia.

Today, to be in solidarity and to accompany our partners is more critical than ever. CPT continues building partnerships and raising our voices together with our partners. We invite you to continue accompanying those communities and supporting our work, with just a click! ■



Accompaniment: Breathing in a new world together

By Melissa Berkey-Gerard. Illustration by Rebekah Dowling

*"Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."*

- Arundhati Roy

"Embody creative nonviolence and liberating love." This core value of CPT is aspirational. It calls us to work together with our partners in ways that go beyond acting strategically and efficiently. Our work is grounded in love that is creative, free, and liberative.

Last summer, in Cali, Colombia, we celebrated the completion of the CPT training with a huge barbeque, prepared by CPTers from Iraqi Kurdistan, Colombia, and Turtle Island. The trainees had worked hard for five weeks, including on a successful solidarity action to protest the murder and disappearance of Colombian social leaders. Earlier in the day, CPTers had received their certificates, and started to pack up the training center. After our feast, a few of us gathered around the remains of the fire from the barbeque. We shared stories about the training, and some long-term CPTers recalled significant moments in their accompaniment work. We talked about the intensity of CPT training, especially the role plays that prepare us to interact with armed actors nonviolently. Sharing stories helped us to process those stressful moments. We decided we needed to dispose of the cardboard weapons we used in these role plays, to really clear our minds and bodies of the experience. We tossed the cardboard cutouts

one by one into the flames and watched as the fire consumed them. It was a ritual that reminded us of the power of creative nonviolence to destroy the weapons of war. I felt myself relax, release, as the flames leapt high and the guns dissolved to ash.

CPTers are wildly creative at nonviolent resistance. And since the start of the pandemic, teams have worked hard to adjust the way they accompany partners while preventing the virus's spread. We have created online actions and webinars that share our partners' stories worldwide.

But, in reality, these months have been challenging and exhausting. Teams were separated; CPTers were (and some still are) in harsh lockdowns; several CPTers and their family members became ill with Coronavirus, and a few CPTers consequently lost loved ones. Oppressive governments have exploited the pandemic to further oppress our partners.

Amid such harsh realities, how do we not just pivot to the virtual world? How do we stick to our core and embody liberating love? It's easy to lose sight of why we are in this work, especially when many of our teams can't be physically present with our partners.

In my role as Care Coordinator, I seek to create space where we can hear the breathing of the new world that is on her way. Where in the midst of chaos, we can feel our own hearts beating and listen for what our bodies and spirits need to

stay in this work. The day-to-day work of accompaniment and administration can take its toll on CPTers. This work can be traumatic for every team member.

The pandemic can exacerbate trauma, so it's been important to always offer space to process our experiences, both as teams and individuals. When tensions run high due to stress, we provide space to name what is hard, to speak about the impact of oppression, to heal as individuals. We need space to ask for what we need from our teammates, to draw out the strength and courage that we see in each other. And we need to remind each other of what keeps us hopeful, why we do this work, what matters at the deepest part of our beings. We need to stop together and listen for the quiet signs of liberation that break through even during tremendous suffering.

I miss being in person with my colleagues. There is something lost when our only connection is virtual. But we are finding each other. We are reminding each other of why we are here. Sharing what keeps us hopeful. Sharing songs of freedom and resistance. We join across time zones and light candles together, whisper our griefs, witness each others' pain and hold each other in the love that liberates. We remind each other about the world we are working for, the one in which everyone is free. ■

Christian Peacemaker Teams: An evolving experiment toward solidarity

By Kathy Kern



CPTer Mohammad Salah documents the testimony of Peiman Talib, a survivor of Turkish bombing that hit her shop in Kuna Masi on June 25, 2020.

Many of the people who joined the first Christian Peacemaker Team trainings in the 1990s came inspired by Ron Sider's 1984 vision of brave, committed Anabaptist Christians risking their lives to stand between warring parties. They did not realize that the activists, organizers, and those who had served in Mennonite, Brethren, and Friends organizations in North America and overseas had started CPT believing that Sider's vision

would not work. They knew that the kind of political work they wanted CPT to do—engaging the church in Nonviolent Direct Action—required building relationships with communities.

But those of us who joined the first training in 1993 did not.* Some had a commitment to the Ron Sider vision and wanted to be heroes; some did not care very much whether they lived or died because of life circumstances at

the moment—and there was some overlap between the two.

The first project for newly trained CPTers was the accompaniment of the Parish of Ste. Helene in Jeremie, Haiti that became the target of Haitian army and paramilitary attacks after the military coup that ousted Jean Bertrand Aristide. We came prepared to use all of the NVDA skills we had learned in training, but the Parish wanted us just to...be present, to walk around the neighborhood in a highly visible manner visiting with our neighbors. In the evening, back in the unfinished priest's residence, we would talk strategies about ways to challenge the systemic violence of the coup regime, but we had no electricity and thus no way to bounce our ideas off our point person in Port Au Prince or the Chicago Office. Days, weeks, months passed, and we watched our neighbors grow hungrier and more desperate. We kept looking for reassurance from our translator that we were making a difference until he told us he was tired of the conversation. Instead of enjoying the time spent with our neighbors and learning to deflect requests for aid graciously, many of us just became frustrated that we couldn't prove we had caused something not to happen.

As we carried the CPT template of accompaniment, NVDA, and public witness into subsequent projects in Palestine, Chiapas, Washington, DC, and the Oceti Sakowin encampment in South Dakota, we began to notice something about CPTers who loved hanging out with people in the community, going to their dances, parties and listening to what was happening in their lives. They experienced less burnout, were learning more about what the people living in these locations wanted us to do, and in general, were more effective at the work. We began to understand that we needed to reconsider what we called "work," and what we thought was "just visiting."

The CPT accompaniment template was beginning to break down, and once Colombians joined the Colombia team, its demise was all but certain.

Nigerian author Teju Cole introduced the term "White Saviour" in 2012. Had we heard the phrase in our first 1993 training, perhaps we would have reflected more on the governing principles of accompaniment that other accompaniment organizations and we were following. We had had antiracism training before we went into the field. Yet, at the same time, we were using as a core feature of our work that the Powers oppressing the

people we accompanied considered our lives more valuable than theirs. A person highly placed in the Peace Brigades (PBI) organization once told me that PBI called this advantage "effective racism." Most CPTers preferred the term, "passport privilege," but when you stripped aside the rhetoric, the concept revealed itself as just...racism.

As we saw that the Colombia Team functioned more effectively with Colombians on the team and realized that our organizational culture had been traumatizing racialized people within the organization, we knew we had to overhaul how we worked. In 2009, we hired Sylvia Morrison as an Undoing Oppressions Coordinator, who confirmed that our accompaniment model was oppressive and having a negative impact within our teams, delegations, administration, and communications.

We began to focus on forming partnerships instead of protecting people, and our Mission, Vision, and Values, drawn up in 2014, reflects that change. We now build "partnerships to transform violence and oppression," and "strengthen grassroots initiatives." These partnerships and initiatives now give us our direction. People on the ground tell us what they need, whether it is accompaniment, a social media campaign, political advocacy, or sometimes, accepting their hospitality.

You may think that I have judged the early years of CPT harshly. But by the time you read this article, I will have retired from the organization for which I have worked 27 years—in the field, as a writer and editor, and on social media. I have written two histories of its work and origins. And I see that from the beginning, Christian Peacemaker Teams has been an experiment kept going by the love, commitment, hard work, creativity, and passion for transformation of its founders and those who came after. This creativity has taken us to places where no other NGOs have worked and has often inspired others to follow us. It helped us respond to crises that happened to our teams and to our partners. It always keeps a bright, dynamic space open for responses to other invitations, when we have no money, when we have no people, when we have to say, "no." It still, through the grace of God, keeps that space open. ■

** One lingering problem that the organization struggles with is the passing down of institutional memory. Few participants in the first training were aware that CPT was on a track to become an organization of activist delegations, like Witness for Peace.*

David and Susannah Shantz



Pierre's parents, David and Susannah Shantz, were first introduced to CPT in 1993 when Lena, Susannah's sister, began working in Haiti. She regularly wrote home about her experiences while raising awareness about the reality of injustice in Haiti. On one occasion, it caught Pierre's attention. Aunt Lena wrote that there was a need for young French-speaking volunteers.

"It was with some apprehension that we encouraged Pierre to join his first delegation to Haiti. With CPT, we understood that peacemaking meant getting directly involved in the conflict. It meant accompanying or living with those who wanted to resolve the conflict in a nonviolent fashion. It would mean living on the front lines with the victims and interacting with the offenders." That was 24 years ago.

Pierre grew up in a Mennonite home where conversations about pacifism and simple living were commonplace. When he was nine, he recalls his parents taking him to a peace march in Winnipeg. "We hosted a Cambodian refugee for several months. And if someone at church needed help, we were often recruited to go and help out. All these different experiences taught me that caring for others is a key component of Christian discipleship. To accompany others." So when Pierre read Aunt Lena's invitation, he recalls it speaking deep to his heart. "It inspired me to take a step towards doing something for justice, not just talking about it," he remembers.

Accompaniment has been a fundamental trait in David's work as a pastor. Back in 1964, he remembers volunteering with the Big Brother Association in Kitchener, ON, Canada, which paired him with a 10-year-old boy. "My responsibility was to simply accompany him. To be a friend. To walk with him through the ebb and flow of the routine of life. I was a presence, a mentor for a young boy, but my involvement included the whole family." Fifty-two years later, "we're still in contact with each other," says David. This experience taught him about peacemaking for the first time.

Over the years, the meaning of accompaniment in the Shantz household grew alongside CPT. "Accompaniment" confuses

many people and finds its shape and meaning in the stories that describe it. "When I first joined CPT, accompaniment was "Getting in the Way:" outsiders courageously going into dangerous situations to stand between people who are suffering and those committing violence," describes Pierre. "Even though my parents have always supported me, I think it did cause them to lose a little sleep." CPT has grown out of the superhero image of Getting in the Way. Through years of on-the-ground experience, CPT learned that conflict is not shaped by the binary world of superheroes and villains. "We don't see ourselves as getting in the way, but building partnerships and walking with people along the journey of standing up against violence," says Pierre.

Since Pierre joined CPT in 1996 — as part of teams in Haiti, Palestine, Chiapas, Mexico, Burnt Church, New Brunswick, Canada, and since 2001 in Colombia — David and Susannah have financially supported CPT and Pierre's involvement in it. "This support is part of that peacemaking accompaniment," says Pierre. "I am very fortunate to have the support of my family, friends, and church community while I accompany communities in Colombia. Whether it is political, financial, or spiritual, it is part of what tells those who are suffering 'you are not alone.' And it is critical to telling those who are committing injustice that the world is watching them while being a reassurance to our partners."

On a trip to Colombia, David and Susannah were asked by a pastor what they thought of Pierre being in the midst of violence. David responded, "When the Father saw there was a special need, He sent His Son."

"As parents, I believe that we should teach our children to have a fair and accurate understanding of affairs in the world. We should then be ready to encourage them to become peacemakers according to the example of Christ in and wherever they live."

"We rejoice with Pierre and all the members of CPT for the excellent work that they are doing." ■

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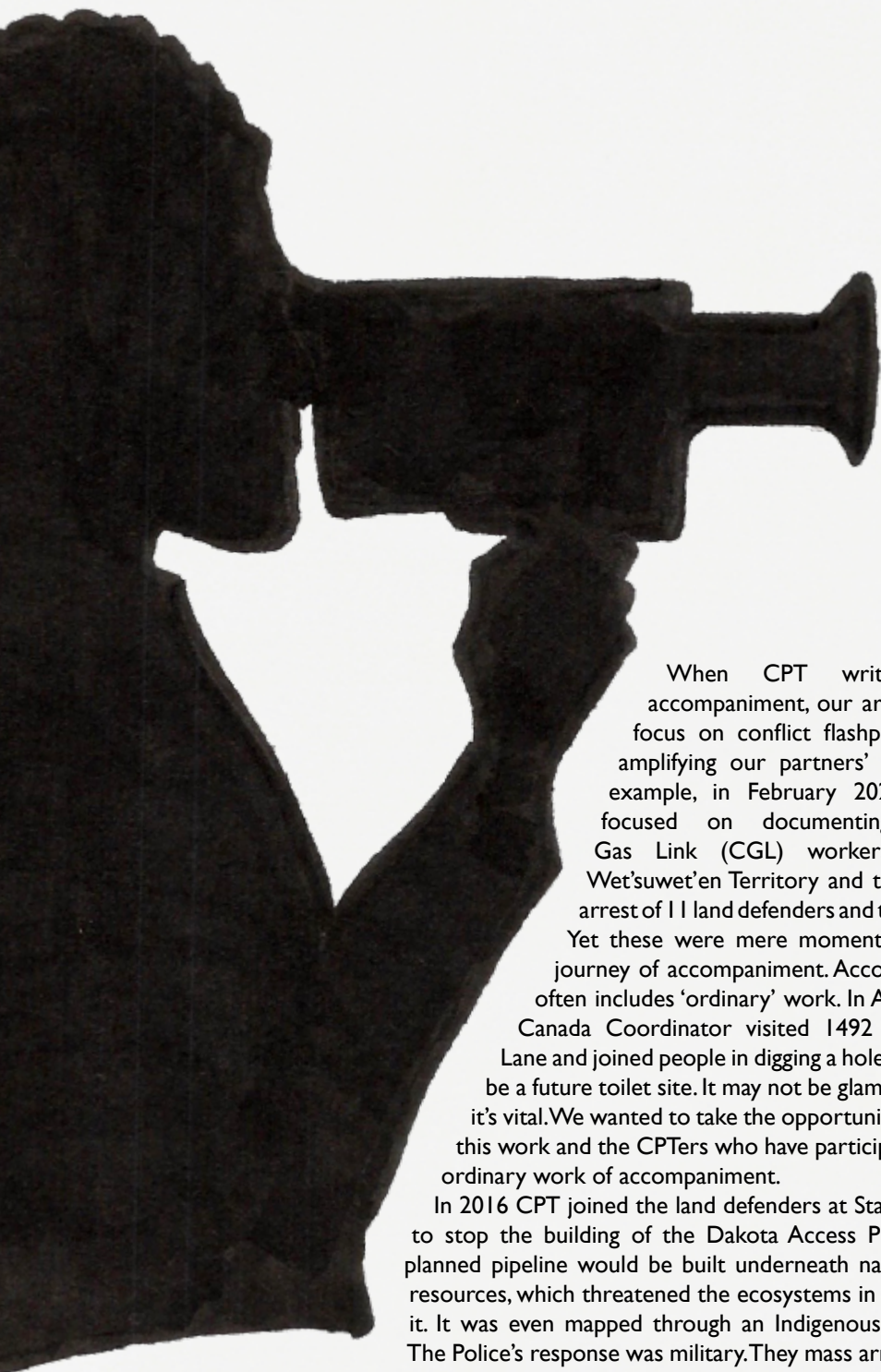
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The ordinary work of accompaniment

By Rachelle Friesen. Illustrations by Caitl Light



When CPT writes about accompaniment, our articles often focus on conflict flashpoints while amplifying our partners' voices. For example, in February 2020, CPTers focused on documenting Coastal Gas Link (CGL) workers entering Wet'suwet'en Territory and the unlawful arrest of 11 land defenders and two CPTers. Yet these were mere moments in a long journey of accompaniment. Accompaniment often includes 'ordinary' work. In August, CPT Canada Coordinator visited 1492 Land Back Lane and joined people in digging a hole that would be a future toilet site. It may not be glamorous, but it's vital. We wanted to take the opportunity to honor this work and the CPTers who have participated in the ordinary work of accompaniment.

In 2016 CPT joined the land defenders at Standing Rock to stop the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The planned pipeline would be built underneath natural water resources, which threatened the ecosystems in and around it. It was even mapped through an Indigenous burial site. The Police's response was military. They mass arrested Land Defender and their allies, suffocated them with tear gas, and

blinded them with pepper spray. These are the flashpoints that are remembered.

Kody Hersh was at Standing Rock. Not every day was a flashpoint.

"I went to Standing Rock for a week in November. My teammate and I worked in the legal tent at the Oceti Sakowin camp collecting information from water protectors about their support needs in case of arrest. The primary assistance needed was to gather this information and pass it to the legal team about what people might expect if they were arrested. We spent most hours of the day welcoming people to the legal tent, handing them a paper form and a pen, helping them fill it

"I remember receiving a call from Maria Swain, a family member of those blockading the bridge. She told me there were families and babies present at the blockade. They needed diapers and infant formula, and the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) refused to allow anyone to leave to buy supplies. I bought diapers, formula, bread, and peanut butter. The OPP allowed me to cross their own blockade and escorted me to the site, where they searched everything I brought before handing it over. But eventually, I was able to deliver the necessary supplies."

From 1999-2002 non-Indigenous lobster fishers protested and attacked the Indigenous



out, and filing it. It was fairly routine work on the surface, but I hope and believe it helped the legal team provide effective support to water protectors undertaking tremendous personal risk in the face of state violence."

Kathy Moorehead-Thiessen was also at Standing Rock.

"One of the profound ordinary works of accompaniment was at Standing Rock when I took on the task of butchering alpaca meat. Not exactly what I had imagined when we went there."

In 2006 members of Grassy Narrows set up a blockade on Separation Lake Bridge near Kenora to prevent clear cut logging on their traditional territories. For years, members of Grassy Narrows had petitioned governments to honor their territorial sovereignty. They had even constructed a permanent blockade close to their community. Having their concerns ignored, in 2006, members expanded their blockade, taking over Separation Lake Bridge near Kenora. CPT was there, observing, documenting, and providing jail relief. Esther Kern remembers some of the ordinary work she participated in.

Mi'kmaq lobster fishers from Esgenoopetitj. In 1999, the Supreme Court ruled that Mi'kmaq lobster fishers were allowed to fish for profit as part of their inherent treaty rights. Non-Indigenous fishers became angry, protesting and cutting the trap lines of the Indigenous fishers. As tensions rose, the Department of Fisheries (DFO) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police got involved. They started targeting the Mi'kmaq lobster fishers. CPT was invited to accompany the Mi'kmaq lobster fishers both from the shore and in the boats. In 2000, CPT documented DFO boats ramming the Mi'kmaq lobster boats- throwing the fisherman into the waters. This is how Doug Pritchard remembers it.

"Many people remember the video footage of the Department of Fisheries attack on lobster fishermen in Esgenoopetitj. That footage culminated after hours upon hours of CPT standing on the shoreline watching and filming. At the end because of a 60-second clip that required hours of constant vigilance and watching. It didn't end the conflict but it ended the direct physical attacks." ■

The bomb, the pilot, and the valley

By Rûnbîr Serkepkanî

To be a jet pilot is to be my enemy. To be the defender of a nation, means to be the bomber of my community, the amputator of my friend Saman's nine-month-old legs.

I was talking to a relative, who told me about his brother, a combat pilot until he retired. "Defending the nation," said my relative, concluding the conversation. I did not say anything. I asked myself, how can a jet plane pilot defend the nation? All the images of people I know who had gone to those front lines, shooting at enemies with sniper guns and Katyushas, killing them with bombs and daggers. BKC machine guns and Kalashnikovs. Each of them justifying their actions with the excuse that they were defending the nation. Then I remembered my friend Saman, whose two legs were cut off by a bomb that fell on his home when he was just a baby.

My son is nine-months-old, the same age as Saman when an Iranian jet plane cut off his legs. All of a sudden I could see jet planes coming. My frightened soul could hear them coming closer and closer and then dropping the bombs over us. And then fire, destruction, darkness, limbs spreading all around and an uncertain future. A Saman growing up without his legs and his parents.

I also remembered my friend Fatah who told me about his experiences during the Iraq and Iran war. He saw thousands of dead soldiers: Christians, Madeans, Shias, Sunnis, Ezidis,

Arabs, Kurds, Persians, Balochs, Lurs, all of them slaughtered together by a gas poured over them by Iraqi airplanes. "Both fronts were silent in death," Fatah said. They were all united. In death.

My earliest memories are about jet planes

bombing my village. From the Iranian government because we were "Iraqis". The Iraqi government was bombing us because we were "Kurdish Separatists". And my life is full of people who lost their lives, limbs or became disabled by trauma because of helicopters and jet planes dropping bombs over them. To be a jet pilot is to be my enemy. To be the defender of a nation, means to be the bomber of my community, the amputator of my friend Saman's nine-month-old legs.



One of the many Unexploded Ordinances (UXO) that remain littered around the base of Halgurd, Iraq's second highest mountain standing at 3608m (12,000 ft). This piece of ordinance and the many land mines in the area are remnants of Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's. Halgurd, Iraqi Kurdistan - Iran border. Photo: Caldwell Manners

What were the Iranian and Iraqi governments thinking? Were Saman's legs just a tiny part of an ink drop with which the leaders of the Iranian and Iraqi nations wrote their fiery speeches, which made soldiers go into the hell they had created? What did the pilot think?

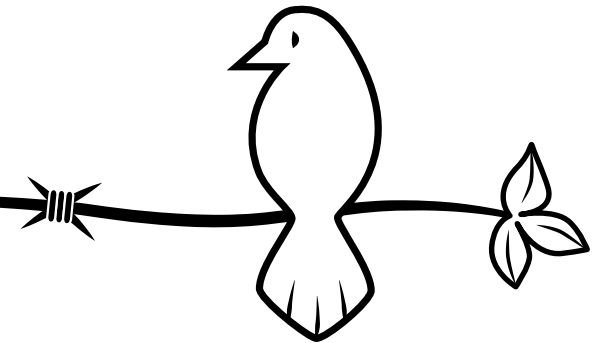
What orders did he have? "Go and bomb that town to make a statement against the enemies of the Iranian nation?"

Well, when an Iranian combat plane fell into my home valley and the pilot survived, my fellow valley people saved his life. They did not give fiery speeches. They did not think twice. They did not follow the laws of any governments. According to the unwritten law of my valley, you help people who are in distress. The Iraqi forces tried their best, with threats, manipulation and many other methods to make the people of the valley hand over the pilot. But they protected him, hosted him, gave him the care and help he needed in order to heal and go back to his family. The members of my community did not see him as the enemy of "our nation". They did not take it into consideration that this same man came to bomb our valley. That he was probably the pilot who had taken the legs from my friend Saman. They did not see him as a representative of the Iranian government. They did not let the Iraqi government take him, execute him and bury him in an anonymous grave, where his family could not visit him on Thursday mornings. They saw him as a father who needed to go back to his children, a son who needed to go back to his mother, a husband who needed to go back to his wife. They saw him as a human being with wounds. They risked their own security to protect him from anyone who wanted to harm him. When he was healed, they smuggled him all the way back to his family and those who loved him.

Nation-States need to destroy people with bombs and drones without ever knowing who they are. They dehumanise so many people by making them into statesmen, living propaganda machines, soldiers, and pilots. Indoctrinating them with false promises, false stories and false borders.

Most people in my community would not be less oppressed if their land was occupied by an Iranian or Iraqi army. It would not change so much if our land were included in the imaginary maps of Iran or Iraq. We are people of the valley and we follow what we think is right because regardless of how many bombs they drop over us, we will not be dehumanized.

When my valley was liberated from the Iraqi occupation in 1991, the former pilot came back on his own feet, walking over the soil to his friends. He was demilitarised, denationalised. He was forgiven. He was free. He was grounded. He was reunited with his friends. In life. ■



Building Partnerships to Transform
Violence and Oppression



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