

Souls NPR (Boise State Radio) essay
On the radio 12/20/05 at 7:35am, 11:35am, 5:45pm

Nosing the bow of the sailboat into the lee of an outcropping of rocks, we dropped the anchor. Safe from the ocean's swell, off the west coast of Mexico, we would spend our first Christmas away from home. THIS IS CHRISTIE GORSLINE, WITH AN IDAHO PERSPECTIVE.

At this spot 10 weeks ago there was a devastating earthquake. When the ground ceased shuddering and the aftershocks began, the waters of Bahia de Navidad roared out of the bay into the Pacific Ocean and returned, a monster the height of a two-story building. An earthquake this close to the sea frequently causes a tidal wave and that is what happened. Restaurants, hotels, homes and shops that were still standing after the quake were washed clean or leveled by the powerful force of the tidal surge that overpowered the beach front towns.

A 30-minute bus ride delivered us to Cihuatlan, the epicenter of the earthquake. Slabs of concrete lay at odd angles where the sidewalks had buckled and buildings caved in. The scratchy strains of recorded Christmas music wafted from a home with no doors or windows. The only other sound was the distant cadence of waves on the beach and the voices of neighbors going about their daily routines. A few shops were open and a restaurant had set up make shift tables in the alley.

As we wandered, we handed out gifts from the Santa's bag of treats we had brought for this purpose. We gave candy, crayons, and tablets to children and lipsticks, cigars and toothbrushes to their parents.

In the fading sunlight we joined a parading stream of villagers. We were the only white faces in what seemed to be an impromptu candlelight procession. They sang Christmas tunes that we recognized, in an unfamiliar language. We hummed along and tried to move unobtrusively, giving away the trinkets we carried.

We stopped in the entry of a temporary chapel, set-up between earthquake-toppled walls of the once proud church. Her red trimmed white stucco spire listed. The cracks in the walls were large enough for sea birds to fly through.

Children smiled at us shyly and accepted the last of our small gifts. A woman dressed entirely in black, from the knitted shawl that covered her head to her scuffed shoes, gazed with adoration at the crucifix in the front of the makeshift church. She was no taller than my shoulder and leaned on a cane roughly whittled from a tree branch.

She must have sensed my presence because without turning her head she began speaking quickly in a rapid Spanish that I couldn't translate. When I didn't respond, she lifted her chin in my direction, gesturing toward the cross. Dark eyes gleamed in her lined, walnut hued face. I smiled and gestured with a shrug that said I didn't understand. My limited study of Spanish just wasn't enough. I felt despair that I couldn't talk to this little woman who had so much to say. We had neither a mutual culture nor a common language.

But without words, we shared something. She reverently patted my empty gift bag and we turned to each other in a warm hug. I looked down into her wizened face, brought to life by shining black eyes and she looked up into my blue eyes. We knew that, as women, we had already communicated.

There are moments when souls touch without words.

We were the same. Two women who cared.