

Welcoming Strangers

an interview with Lynnette Arnold

by Holly Anderson

Holly Anderson is a member of Santa Barbara Meeting and attends Ojai Worship Group. Lynnette Arnold attends Santa Barbara Meetin, and serves on the Latin American Concerns Committee of Pacific Yearly Meeting. Holly conducted this interview with Lynnette in May 2015.

Holly's Introduction: I sat down to talk to Lynnette today because as soon as I read Welcoming Strangers on the list of topics that Western Friend would cover in its magazine this year, she immediately popped into mind. I met Lynnette last year at PYM when she called for interested Friends to meet to discuss the problems of the overwhelming numbers of children fleeing to the U. S. from Central America. For her, this concern has evolved to monthly conference calls as the convener of a sub-committee of the PYM Latin American Concerns, two trips to a detention center for families in Karnes, Texas, and fasting recently in solidarity to support a hunger strike by detained mothers. Lynnette is a member of the Santa Barbara Meeting and is currently completing a PhD in Linguistics at UC Santa Barbara. We met at the Santa Barbara Meetinghouse where she was fasting.

Holly Anderson: Lynnette, how did you first get involved with working on immigration issues?

Lynnette Arnold: I grew up in a Bruderhof community near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It is an Anabaptist community that is similar to the Amish, Mennonites, and Hutterites. When I was just out of high school, my community encouraged me to work in a kindergarten in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh is a sister city to a village in El Salvador, and one of the boys in my class was Salvadoran. I became interested in going to El Salvador, convinced my parents to let me go, and raised money for the trip. My parents were very worried about me the first time, but after that, they supported me, morally and spiritually. I planned to go for 2 months, but stayed for 4 until I ran out of money. After my first visit, I lived in El Salvador for four years, from 2001 to 2005, going back to raise funds as needed. I led a group of Bruderhof high school teens, which included two of my sisters to help repair things after the earthquake in 2001. I also worked with Voices on the Border, a secular group that was started during the Civil War and later I connected with CRISPAZ, Christians for Peace in El Salvador. This is an organization with volunteers from a variety of different religious denominations. There were many Quakers there, and this is where I first connected with them. We had several retreats and gatherings. As part of my time there, I was a rural village volunteer. I taught English and helped with a woman's sewing co-op.

HA: What moved you to try to solve problems of people in a culture not your own?

LA: This is an important question for a privileged person. My acting to create more welcome to immigrants has more to do with my connection to them: they aren't strangers, they are friends and family. When I was with CRISPAZ, I accompanied people, which means really being with the people in their day-to-day lives. During the civil war, it was also a way of protecting people from violence. I lived in a little storage room and then spent one month eating all my meals with a local family. The next month I would do the same with another family. I lived side by side with the people there. I had personal connections with them and shared their everyday joys and sorrows. I grew close to them; they were my family. I spent a lot of time talking to people about the relationship between the United States and El Salvador: how the United States treated El Salvador, how it supported the military there, how people were uprooted, how the economy was affected and people ended up in refugee camps. Talking opened my eyes to see connections between the two countries. Many things were done in my name. These immigrants are not strangers; they are friends, family, and victims of our misguided policies.

HA: I know you have been trying to help a woman from El Salvador who's currently in detention. Can you tell me about your friend?

LA: I taught Sonia in my English class in El Salvador; that's when we became friends. She has 3 children: Avi, who is 10; Valentin, 9, and Moises, who is 3. Now, she and her children are in a detention camp in Karnes, Texas. They were forced to leave due to the violence and threats in their hometown. I've been to see them twice since they've been there. It's very difficult for them. They share a room of 4 bunk beds with another family. At first they were locked in their room all the time, now at least they are allowed out. It was good to see them, but hard to see them locked up.

HA: How did this work force you to confront your own stereotypes about people from other cultures?

LA: We think of the people there as victims, but they have strength and resilience and have made amazing sacrifices. They are very inspirational. They have visions of what they want. Women in Karnes have just had a hunger strike; they want a more just world. We can learn a lot from them. My journey has opened my heart and taken the scales off my eyes. I saw the connections. Working with them and living with them took the "other" lens off that we often have. I came from a male dominated background and in El Salvador I got to see strong women. Without men there, because they were imprisoned or at war, the women became leaders.

HA: How has this work caused you to confront your own relationship with the Light?

LA: I keep coming back to the question of how to walk in the Light in this world. In the United States we have a long history of injustice, of treating people badly, motivated by greed. Separating people in categories of deserving or not, weakens puts and us in a judgment place rather than a welcoming place. The U.S. has welcomed many people. When there is unity, amazing things can happen, so there is no reason for this not to be true now, but it's easy to feel lost. What can I do to make a difference? What can I do without causing further hurt? What can I do that will lead to connection? I need the light to guide my

actions. I see the light in other friends who inspire me. I see the light in the detained mothers on hunger strikes. I am trying to follow my leading and light to keep me grounded so I'm not acting out of my own strength. I'm trusting in the light.

HA: What have you learned through this work on behalf of Friends everywhere and not just for yourself?

LA: We need to learn to see and feel our connections to people all over the world and with people in our own back yard anyway we can, that's powerful. We have no choice but to open our hearts and our lives. That's the way of light and love. We can't all take on everything, so we have to trust our leading. If we each open a door in whatever way we can, that's powerful. Who knows what can happen when we build bridges instead of walls?

HA: How do you see your work in the future?

LA: I'll continue to walk with immigrants who are suffering; in particular, women and children. We're working towards freeing them from the for profit prisons they're being held at and also providing free legal and mental health care for them. We're trying to get pen pals started who will write the women in detention. Our conference calls with the sub-committee are growing- that's exciting. We are planning an interest group at PYM, which can involve Jr. Friends and other informal meetings. I'll follow the Light.