

## WHAT DOES MUSIC HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

A Memoir ~ Adrienne Aron<sup>1</sup>

Two kids, two continents, two entirely different class positions and family situations—one an amateur magician from a bourgeois family in Valladolid, Spain, the other a *lumpen* American kid from the streets of St. Louis, Missouri—and both grow up to be liberation psychologists. How does psychology explain it? I've got an idea, supported by some flimsy evidence, not testable or provable, but so sweet I thought it should be passed around and shared. As Plato said of his ideal Forms, Is our theory any the worse because we are unable to prove it?

Granted, I am working with an  $N$  of only 2, but Ebbinghaus, with an  $N$  half that size, was able to teach us volumes about learning and forgetting, and he had to do it all in German! I am simply looking for the active ingredient that binds one to a future in Liberation Psychology. Assisted by twice the number of subjects as were available to Ebbinghaus, and buttressed by a little support from Google, this modest goal should certainly be attainable, if only the reader will give it the same small indulgence one gives a magician: a suspension of disbelief.

There are many who believe that Martín-Baró's ordination to the priesthood was a critical—perhaps *the* critical—event in his evolution toward Liberation Psychology. His membership in the Society of Jesus gave him ample exposure to the liberating reforms of Vatican II, and he had plenty of opportunity to be influenced by the 1968 Medellín conference of Latin American bishops, where a theological emphasis on Jesus's social concerns gained ascendance over the historical emphasis on the divine nature of the

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Christian Savior. The bishops' enunciation of a preferential option for the poor resonated throughout the world, and especially the Third World, where the young Jesuit was being trained in his religious vocation.

A case can also be made for a major influence being exerted by a parallel shift that was taking place in psychology around this same time. Where before the focus had been on the infallible wisdom of the great psychotherapist, now there came a client-centered therapy with a degree of individual empowerment. We can see in Martín-Baró's writings that he perceived these shifts in psychology and theology as salutary moves. Clearly, they had an impact on his intellectual development. Another significant influence, as Luis de la Corte Ibañez points out in *Memoria de un Compromiso* (2001, p. 40) was Paolo Freire's idea of a pedagogy of the oppressed.

Historian Mary Jo Ignoffo (2014, p. 158) suspects that Ignacio's embrace of Liberation thought came about in 1968, when he and his friend Rutilio Grande were students in Louvain, Belgium. I believe it must have occurred earlier, however, because by then Ignacio was already devoting his weekends to helping Spanish immigrants in Brussels. He had already been in the jungles of El Chocó, working with Afro-Colombian communities and trying, as his biographer Nelson Portillo (2012, p. 79) points out, to understand the roots of fatalism among disenfranchised people. The seeds of liberation thought, planted long before, had already germinated. By the time he returned to El Salvador, where Ignacio Ellacuría was busy at the UCA building a university for social change, Martín-Baró, though he hadn't yet begun his study of psychology, was already committed to those principles of social change. He began teaching philosophy and literature at the Externado, the Jesuit high school in San Salvador, and while there he took

on another job—something easily overlooked but possibly very important because it may point back to an early inspiration that would later blossom into liberation psychology.

Padre Ignacio Martín-Baró was directing the school chorus.

*Song!*

Doubtless he was leading those boys in chants for the chapel, not songs of struggle, but here, in this first linkage of music to Martín-Baró's professional activities, a little imagination can push us toward a possible wellspring of Liberation Psychology.

In Europe, before returning to the UCA in 1969, Nacho, as he was called, took on a side job as a translator. That's how he was able to afford the Spanish guitar he brought back with him to Central America. He had grown up around music. His father was a music lover and balladeer, his sister Alicia would make a career of music, as a teacher for thirty-five years. Suzanne Ouellette, Ignacio's academic advisor at the University of Chicago, where he earned his Ph.D., remarks that Nacho's animated voice, which spoke forcefully about social science, was also "a voice that could sing" (Ouellette, 2012, p. 65). His father described his son's voice as manly, and compared it to a golden cello. The elder Martín, though a supporter of Franco, admitted that Nacho, the artist, with his guitar of the people, touched people through songs that transported them to faraway places (Martín, 1990, p. 67). The young people of Jayaque, where Ignacio served as parish priest, formed a chorus after he died. He had always brought them candy when he came on the week-ends, and with his guitar and voice he'd brought happiness to their meetings and parties, they said (Carranza, 1990, p. 106). After his death they wrote to his sister Alicia, "It's not the same as when he was here, because he sang, and when we were

feeling down he took us out to play...He was everything to us. That's why we changed the name of our village. Now we call it "*Comunidad Martín-Baró*" (Ana, 1990, p. 91).

People who knew Ignacio's intellectual work often commented on his singing. Charlie Bierne, his close Jesuit friend and counterpart as university Vice-President at Santa Clara University in California, said to me when I met him during one of Ignacio's visits to the Bay Area, "Did he bring his guitar? You've got to have him play for you." It was after that that I knew it was important to mention his music in the introduction to *Writings for a Liberation Psychology* (1994, p.13).

Thanks to Lucía Cerna, the priests' housekeeper at the UCA, we have a record of Ignacio's last words, his scream of outrage at the soldiers of the Atlacatl Battalion's assassination squad. Also forming part of her memory are his last songs. With the house surrounded by soldiers who let no one come or go, Ignacio had his guitar out and was entertaining his Jesuit brothers. Lucía recalls that on that last, fateful night, Nachito was singing "De Colores." It is the anthem of the United Farm Workers in the United States, and it sings of the land, the fields, the animals, and the multi-colored great loves available for the enjoyment of everyone, including those who come like the birds, from far away. He once told Lucía that he needed the guitar because it kept him company, and he once shared with me that his favorite singer was Facundo Cabral, the Argentine artist whose signature melody was the whimsical "No Soy De Aquí"—

I'm not from here, and not from there;

No date of birth, no plan for Where,

And my i.d., it pictures me

As someone happy.

Is it too long a stretch to believe that song could have paved the road to Ignacio's liberation psychology? Do I project too much from my own journey? At summer camp in the Missouri Ozarks, in a beautiful expanse of the outdoors halfway between the Redwood Forest and the Gulfstream Waters, when I was about ten years old I fell in love with the songs of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

Folk song lyrics became a compass that oriented me to the world, filling in for the moral education I wasn't getting at home, introducing me to provocative and fascinating thoughts: What I could do with a hammer and a bell and a song to sing; why the bank vaults were stuffed with silver that the miners sweated for; why Pretty Boy Floyd was a hero but the gangster I called Dad was just a gangster. Big ideas for a little kid.

Years passed, and, guided by that moral compass, I wound up in human rights work. There is actually a direct line from one of Woody Guthrie's songs to my work as a Liberation Psychologist.

Woody had called his song "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos," for an incident in 1948 when an airplane crashed in California. The plane had been chartered by the U.S. Immigration Service to carry 28 migrant laborers back to Mexico. The newspapers reported the names of the lost flight crew, but the farmworkers who perished in the accident were identified only as "Mexican nationals." No names. Nobodies: *You won't have a name when you ride the big airplane / All they will call you will be deportee...*

Much of my work today is with refugees fleeing persecution. I write clinical reports documenting the psychological state of people seeking protection from the torture, or battering, or other traumatic abuse they suffered in their homelands. As a

liberation psychologist I try to counter the weight of my own country's military and foreign policy, that crushes people's chances for a safe life at home. I try to have some little influence on where the hammer of justice strikes when the Immigration Judge considers an application for political asylum. I can't guarantee the refugees that my report will set the bells of freedom ringing, but I can promise that I'll try to help the judge understand them as individuals, as living people, rather than as nobodies in a stack of papers. They should try to be open with me, I say, so I can know who they truly are.

My education around the campfires in the Ozarks taught me much about how to do this work. Mindful of the warnings and dangers, a liberation psychologist can perform a mental health evaluation and write a report informed by love... for one's brothers and sisters all over the world. Submitted to Immigration Court, such a report will affirm the life of one who has suffered injustice, who has been brutalized but has dared to come forward, staggering through a past of rotten times and rotten names—*pig, whore, terrorist, subversive, traitor, liar*. With the help of a good report, he or she may one day be able to sing out in freedom, saved—by the strong swing of the hammer—from being called *deportee*.

As clinicians, researchers and teachers wanting to see the torch of liberation psychology burning bright in years to come, we would do well to look at the songs that have articulated people's values, leading them toward peace and justice or affirming their position on the path that goes in that direction. The trajectory from song to psychology may be short in statistics and footnotes, but it glows with vitality and creativity.

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