

NEWS FROM KATHY AND PHIL IN OAXACA

March-April, 2016

Dear Friends and Family,

Our campesino neighbor mused about the weather as we talked in front of the church before Holy Thursday mass. Wind storms and hard rain in February and March, the dry season! Who knows what is next? Yet, with the optimism that farmers must have before the hard work of the planting season, he concluded, "But it's going to be a good year."

As a precaution, more people are planting the drought resistant "cajete" corn that can survive 3 to 4 months of drought. Tio Juan and I (Phil) planted this corn first in his fields and then in ours last week. CEDICAM is starting a project funded

by the Goldman Foundation to confront climate change by promoting the planting of this ancient corn, developing family seed banks, and working with academic partners to do careful seed selection to increase yields. As Juan and I worked our way across the fields, digging and planting with the ancient "coa", I mentioned I was going to Washington DC in mid-April (Ecumenical Advocacy Days) to lobby against the Trans-pacific Trade Partnership (TPP), because of the negative effects of such trade agreements on our campesino communities.

This made me remember....On January 1st, 1994 we awoke to the flashing red light of our phone message machine. It was our son,

Learning Solar Cooking for the "great reskilling" of our local communities*

Chris, who had been traveling in Central America. "I'm caught in a guerilla war in southern Mexico", he calmly announced, much to our astonishment. "But I'm fine. Happy New Year". He had been there on the plaza of San Cristobal, Chiapas when the Zapatista Liberation Army of indigenous peoples had marched in that midnight. Local police and military personnel scattered in terror as the indigenous leaders announced that they were declaring war on the Mexican state on this, the day of the inauguration of NAFTA, because this trade agreement "meant the death of indigenous peoples".

Their analysis was correct. Subsidized basic grains from the U.S imported at prices below the cost of production (it's called "dumping") destroyed livelihoods in the rural communities of indigenous peoples. Para-state industries and credit banks that supported small scale agriculture were closed, and agricultural assistance shifted primarily to the commercial agricultural sector. Indigenous communal lands protected since the 1917 Mexican constitution were opened to being bought, sold and used as collateral, initiating a return to concentration of lands in the hands of the few. Energy reforms demanded by the new international economy afforded government the right to expropriate indigenous lands in the name of foreign and domestic firms for mining and gas extraction.

As a result, six million campesinos were forced to leave their indigenous villages of Mexico and migrated to the U.S. between 1994 and 2010.

Ecumenical Advocacy Days will bring together some 1000 activists in DC from April 15-18 to lobby against a trade agreement that would intensify these pressures on indigenous Mexican campesino communities, the Trans-Pacific



Partnership. If approved, the TPP would eliminate all remaining tariff and non-tariff barriers to all agricultural products that Mexico produces and might import. The resulting price competition would virtually guarantee another migration crisis in the U.S., as more millions would be forced out of indigenous campesino communities of Mexico.

In addition, the TPP, which is really an agreement to protect corporate “rights” to their profits, would give corporations the right to sue governments over any attempts to give preference to local workers or businesses, or to legislate environmental protections, if these interfere with potential corporate profits. It will strengthen the hand of those that want to impose genetically modified crops on farmers and lengthen patent rights on such crops. The Institute for Trade and Agricultural Policy warns that the TPP tries to return back to the 1991 International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants which increases plant patent rights, now 5-10 years, to 20-25 years and **would prohibit the interchange of seeds by farmers.**

While here in Mexico Pope Frances spoke with great urgency about our need to find a different way to live on this planet. What could he mean? Clearly, the agendas of the powerful, with their wars and trade agreements represent instead “business as usual”.

How about living an economy that is instead based on the values of our indigenous communities here? Here in Yukuyoko our economy is based on a low input agriculture using native seeds, ancient planting models, and locally produced fertilizer and equipment. (Produce local, use local inputs, and rediscover local talents and abilities, the *great reskilling**, the Transition Town movement calls it). A commons is also an integral part of our economy. The forests are free for wood gathering and the communal hillsides for grazing sheep and goats. (Surely we can do more than have common parks and highways: cooperative gardens on public lands, cooperative businesses, community loan funds, and what else?)

Through a system of mutual aid (*guesta*) we plant our corn together, going from one house to another saving having to pay laborers, and we pay no taxes for the upkeep of the village since we do this through community work projects called *tequios*. Fiestas are an essential part of our economy and it is an honor to sponsor the music or food so that everyone, no matter how poor, can join in. (Perhaps fiesta is the way to get us away from the computer and the TV so we can think about these things together)

Wisely, our economy not only takes into consideration actual needs of our villagers and our community. At its base, it has a profound respect for what forms the basis of all economy, our Mother Earth, and for what this Mother means for generations to come. (How to recognize our Mother in the world around us and eschew the myth of the machine?)

Part of “the great reskilling” could be learning to use the sun. I (Kathy) gave a solar cooking workshop last week for a group of women, men, and children from Vicente Guerrero, which is a partly shanty-town community located at the city dump outside Oaxaca. This enthusiastic group, working through their progressive Catholic parish, has been studying holistic health, natural foods, use of medicinal herbs, ways to conserve water and energy and protect the environment. They are highly motivated to learn solar cooking as a way to reduce wood smoke, help the environment through the use of clean energy, and save scant family resources. There were exclamations of delight as we sampled steaming pots of rice, vegetables, eggs, potatoes, and pans of oatmeal cookies! They were much interested also to learn an easy solar method to purify drinking water. The remarks showed an “almost too good to be true” response. Yes, it really can be done!

We thank you so much for your messages, your prayers, and your donations, which help to keep making these projects possible. If you wish to contribute to this work, you can send a much appreciated tax-deductible donation to:

Instituto Paz en las Americas, 2645 Mountain View Rd. Silver City, NM 88061.

We thank you very much, and we always love hearing from you.

Phil and Kathy

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