



LOVE, LOSS & LONGEVITY

THE MADRES AND ABUELAS OF PLAZA DE MAYO
& THE ONGOING SEARCH FOR THE 'DISAPPEARED'

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“As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being.”

-CARL JUNG, MEMORIES, DREAMS, REFLECTIONS, 1962.

IT'S THURSDAY AFTERNOON

in Buenos Aires. The air is bitter cold and the winter sun is wrestling with the heavy clouds hovering above Plaza de Mayo. A group of elderly women march in counter-clockwise circles, as they do every Thursday at 3:30pm. Adorned in their symbolic white headscarves, they hold banners that speak of struggle, resistance, never forgetting, and boards that each carry a different worn out photo, a date under each face. They chant fiercely, with a passion and pain that so evidently comes from deep within their very being.



A Madre clutches photos of her 'disappeared' in Plaza de Mayo.



Madres, Abuelas, and their family members marching in Plaza de Mayo

Although I cannot understand their Spanish words, I am instantly transfixed by their obvious anguish, their rage, their hope that flickers like a candlewick that's been burning for too long, but is most certainly still aflame. These are the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.

These women are but some of the remaining mothers and grandmothers of the 'disappeared.' The women who lost their sons, daughters and unborn grandchildren to kidnappings in Argentina's abominable 'Dirty War,' that took place from 1976 to 1983. During these years the military junta's stated goals were complete order and "true democracy." Anyone labeled by

them as "the opposition" was simply removed, tortured, raped and/or murdered. Thirty thousand people disappeared and hundreds of thousands were exiled. What was initially believed to be just another familiar Argentinian coup, turned feverishly fast into mass-genocide. The dictatorship used its power to make innocent civilians 'disappear' into the shadows. The Madres and Abuelas countered them by making themselves appear, together, in broad daylight, in the political center of Buenos Aires, at a time in the country when public meetings were forbidden.

Many of the madres' stolen daughters were pregnant when they were taken;

they gave birth in captivity and had their babies stolen from them. While the madres demand answers as to *what* happened to their own children, the parallel pressing question is- *where* are their children's children- their grandchildren? Despite the madres' and abuelas' advanced ages, their lack of answers, the many battles they have powered through time and again, these women, *still*, over 35 years later, seek the truth about, and justice for, their loved ones- dead or alive. "Ours has always been a collective struggle. So when we find a grandchild, even if not our own, it is as if it were," Estela de Carlotto, president of the Abuelas de Plaza

de Mayo, says to me. "From the moment we first met, in 1977, it's been natural for us. We walk side by side, working together, giving each other strength."

Collective mourning offers strength of community that permits sharing, caring, and mutual witnessing to the horrors of what has transpired, to the pain, to the endurance of their

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humanity, held in communal hope and embrace, in defiance of the cruelty and inhumanity they have been subjected to.

"The search for our grandchildren, 'the lost ones still alive' has kept us going and has us constantly elaborating strategies to find them. The fight for truth and justice, a common goal for all human rights organizations in Argentina, has demanded from us a level of defiant organization," de Carlotto says. 500 babies were taken from their mothers at birth as spoils of war; 109 of them have been found in total; 13 of them in the past five years. "There are two ways," de Carlotto explains to me, of how someone comes to the

realization that they might be one of 'the disappeared.' "Firstly, there are men and women who have had ongoing doubts about their identity. Secondly, from Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo conducting our research and approaching [who we] believe may be our grandchildren." Imagine finding your grandchild after all these years of mourning your child and her child that you never met, or being the child that finds out that your 'parents' were really your captors. "We believe that some of the boys and girls that turn up, know or strongly suspect, that they could be children of the disappeared, but the weight of

their shame in relation to the propaganda they hear keeps them from expressing this. Others are more 'locked in' and deny their position."

The mothers and grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have had a global impact. Geneticists, anthropologists, psychologists, students and volunteers worldwide have helped them obtain answers. From extensive research to

DNA tests on exhumed bodies and the living. This army of women have upended Argentina's nurtured 'truths' about women as inferior, lacking the strength or courage to disobey, to resist, to question. "Madres and Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo have been a part of dozens of trials of crimes against humanity, in particular in those cases that include our grandchildren and the disappearance of their parents we mourn," says de Carlotto. For example, the courts condemned the ex dictator Jorge Rafael Videla to 50 years in prison, the highest penalty against a repressor, for being the head of the Systemic Plan to rob children during the era of terrorism in the Country of Argentina."



The names of the 'disappeared' are read aloud, the madres and abuelas respond "presente!" as they stand present for their children. The woman on the right holds a poster for the release of Jorge Julio Lopez. He was one of the original 'disappeared': he survived. In 2006, he testified against the head of Buenos Aires police for crimes against humanity, on the day of his final testimony, he went missing. There has been no trace of him since.

A vigil that has been maintained, week after week, year after year, decade after decade is about, but also beyond, the quest for justice, the search for missing loved ones, for maintaining public awareness and, hopefully, accountability. We think too of psychic process, of the power and function of memory, of the complexity and importance of collective grief. "The disappearance of children for political reasons was unheard of," says de Carlotto. "Our lives changed completely. Many of us had to leave our jobs, and the search for memory, truth and justice became our full-time occupation."

Memory is what we have left when we have faced great loss. Whether it becomes distorted, idealizing or sentimentalizing, it

serves critically in keeping lost loves alive internally for as long as we live. We remember, lest we forget. We remember so as to keep our loved ones spiritually alive, and indeed to keep ourselves alive. It carries with it not only the horror of what has happened, it allows us to continue to imagine what might have happened instead. It permits our imagination space and life. And, in so doing, we hold hope in ways that permit us to go on living, living with meaning.

Three and a half decades since their world was torn apart, since the madres and abuelas united to fight their lonely and courageous battle, it appears all too clear that they will not stop until their own lives do. The struggle is far from over. Answers



The symbolic white headscarf painted on the ground of Plaza de Mayo. Madres initially wore a white scarf to identify each other. It was also and remains a symbol of their baby's diapers, the peace dove, and the purity of a mother's love. Each child's name and date they went missing is embroidered on their mother's scarf.

are still being sought and the need for justice is the pulse that keeps the movement's body trudging forward- for their babies, for their grandbabies. Plaza de Mayo remains the heart of the resistance, and these women will continue to resist, openly, loudly and publicly. De Carlotto tells me, "They have called us "trail-blazers" with the uncontrollable desire to bring the truth to light, and in our case, "light" signifies that our children complete their birth."

Estela de Carlotto's daughter, Laura, was 2 months pregnant when she was taken by the military. She was murdered. Laura's body was returned to her parents, Estela and Guido, 9 months after her disappearance; her face and womb mutilated. Estela later found out from others that were in the detention camp with Laura, that she gave birth to a son, Guido. He has not been found...yet.