Why So Much Poverty?
I am a white North American who grew up in a primarily white community in the United States. In 2001, I went to Guatemala to work with the Peace Corps. I lived among extremely poor, rural indigenous populations. My job was to train families and school children to plant vegetable gardens in order to improve local health and economies. My job was easy because the people were already agricultural experts. And any seed that you put in to this vitamin-rich soil, grew like a weed.

The area was rich with resources. Why, in a place where the earth gave so much, were people living in such poverty? I was shocked to find out that the answer to this question implicated me and my country.

The U.S. Role in Guatemala
It turns out the U.S. has a history of involvement in Guatemala. In 1954, the CIA orchestrated a coup of the Arbenz government. Arbenz was working to create a more equitable distribution of land and resources for the Guatemalan people. His overthrow meant that many Guatemalans continued to live with limited access to the rich resources of their country.

Meanwhile, U.S. companies and Guatemalan elites reaped huge economic benefits from the land. In the 1980s, the U.S. was further involved in financing weaponry and training for the Guatemalan military. What did the Guatemalan military do with this support? They committed genocide against the poor indigenous people, and disappeared over 250,000 people.

Welcomed Despite the History
Despite this history, I was welcomed in to Guatemalan homes. They shared their best meals with me, sacrificing economically to create community with me. I have a distinct memory of greeting an old woman as we passed each other on the village path. She stopped, grabbed a delicious tropical fruit from the basket on top of her head and shared it with me. She likely lost much-needed profit from her daily market sale through this generous gesture, but it was of a higher value to her to be hospitable than to seek personal gain.

An Opportunity to Heal
Because of the devastation in their country due to economic inequality and war, many Guatemalans have sought refuge in the United States. What would you do if you were living with the question of where your next meal would come from? Worried about whether your children will eat well enough to survive? Wondering if you and your family will survive the daily violence left over from the genocide? What would you do to be sure that you could care for your family?

I would be elated if our country valued hospitality over personal gain—as Guatemalans did for me. Why not create a path to citizenship for immigrants who have sought survival in this country? I long for the day that we could turn this negative history into an opportunity to heal and create a positive, welcoming community in which we share and learn from our diversity.

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