

## Benjamin Linder: The Memory of Justice

One day in early April of last year, Benjamin Linder led the children of El Cua to the town's vaccination clinic. His face was alight with greasepaint, a broad smile, and a clown's nose.

As the little ones followed Ben on his unicycle, he must have looked like the Pied Piper of Nicaragua. Three weeks later he lay dead by a stream: the engineer from Portland, Oregon had been killed in a contra ambush.

I can't remember what I was doing the day Ben was killed. But when I heard the echo of the gunshot wound to his head, my eyes welled with tears I thought were only stored for those I love. Why did the death of a perfect stranger leave me with such a hollow feeling?

Part of the void within me was shaped by photographs of the funeral. One is of an open casket, with Ben in the type of checkered shirt I like to wear. Another is of the Linder family as they follow Ben in his coffin through the town of Matagalpa. Next to Ben's father, David, and his sister, Miriam, is President Daniel Ortega. But it is not his somber stare that moves me — it is the face of Elisabeth Linder. Her fine features give her a look of sculpted sorrow. Her eyes have the unmistakable gaze of a mother who has lost a child: at that frozen moment of anguish she could be Iranian, a black South African, a Nicaraguan. Behind her are some of the 5000 people who turned out for Ben's funeral.

But it's more than just photographs that has led me to mourn the death of someone I never knew. After his death, Ben's family travelled across North America to raise money to help complete his hydroelectric project and to speak out against U.S. foreign policy. The Benjamin Linder Peace Tour included a stop in Montreal. I listened intently as John Linder spoke with passion and eloquence about his brother's quiet commitment to a people whose priorities became his own. When I later told John that I thought there was a bit of Ben's moral sense in all of us, he smiled warmly.

"I have no plans on being a martyr," Ben once wrote from Nicaragua. And he wasn't. He was simply an engineer who chose to use his skills to help bring electricity to a town so that medicine could be refrigerated and classrooms could be lit. And it is that simple desire that touched a place within me I can't afford to lose.

It's the same place where the magistrate held court in J.M. Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The magistrate proclaimed: "All creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice." Fiction has given me moral blueprints, and Ben showed me what one engineer did with them.

Of course, Ben is only one of the thousands who have been killed in Nicaragua. Pablo Rosales and Sergio Hernandez also lost their lives that April day as they worked with Ben to bring light where there had been none before. But Ben's death struck home because of certain similarities: we were born only a few months apart in 1959, both sons of European Jews, both the youngest of three children.

And though we both came into the world with the memory of justice, Ben had the stronger memory. His death triggered the need to remember, and that is not something I want to forget.

Emil Sher

***"Open House", Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, May 8, 1988***