

Carpe diem

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*In memoriam Ana Paola de los Santos Velazquez
and the other souls who departed that day.*

Today, I can tell my experiences of September 19, 2017. I am currently seventeen years old and I am in my second year at the preparatory school of General Lazaro Cardenas del Rio of the Benemerita Universidad Autonoma de Puebla (*Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla*).

The facilities occupied by the High School correspond to a colonial construction that housed a religious order of closure, so called because the nuns had no contact with the people, and when a visit came, which was usually a family member, they covered their faces with a lace veil and that way they chatted. The façade has finishes in Talavera and its door is made of wood painted in brown. It is necessary to advance two meters, approximately, to reach a metal fence where the security personnel are there daily. When going through it we are in the first courtyard of the ground floor and, in the background, my classroom. On the right side is the Principal's office and, further ahead, one of the stairs that leads to the first and second level, where there are six rooms and cubicles for the teachers. On the left side of the ground floor there is a classroom, an empty room and the staircase which only leads to the first level. There are three cubicles, the sanitary for professors for ladies and for gentlemen, and the accounting office. The first and second levels are connected by a corridor, topped by a wrought iron railing that, at the same time, it serves as a canopy, where any fellow can lean against it to relax during free time. From there we listened to the murmur of the simultaneous chat of the companions and they could see us from above, depending on where we were.

The construction has a second patio and more classrooms; however, I stop here... Like every day, I got up at five in the morning, I took a shower, I got ready and had breakfast. Also, like every day, my dad accompanied me to the bus stop to board the minibus that left me a few blocks away from my school.

That Tuesday, I was very happy because I wore for the first time my tennis shoes and I had gone to school with a lot of enthusiasm, since on Wednesday 20th we would make a study trip to Teotihuacan. Usually we finish school at one thirty in the afternoon, but that day we left at one because the history teacher, responsible for the trip, had to organize our documents and do administrative procedures for the next day.

I went out of the classroom with my schoolmate Sofia, she is very small in weight and size, but she is tremendous. We chatted with some schoolmates about our expectations for the next day. Later, we went to the first patio, where we found my schoolmate Yuicelik, very similar to Sofia in her physical

constitution, and very sensitive and kind. She asked us to accompany her for a while, since her younger sister, who is in first year, would go out until half past one. Sofia and I accepted, because it was early and we did not want to leave her alone.

There were several schoolmates scattered in the courtyard. We were in the center, the principal on the side, and next to him my classmates Shakti and Ana Paola, sitting on a bench. While we chatted, I pulled out my phone to check the time. I will never forget it: 1:14 p.m. I put away my cell phone and immediately felt “dizzy” and I thought I was getting sunstroke, since we had been under the sunlight. I looked up and looked down, my two classmates held me tight by the hand. I heard the principal shout: “Everyone to the center, all you guys to the center”. I started to feel fear and insecurity, my hands sweated and my smile left my face. There were more classmates of different grades and groups in that same courtyard.

There I realized that it was not dizziness. I had never felt the uncertainty so clearly, the confusion, the anguish, all at the same time... and the death so close. I knew I was not alone, but I do not remember being holding hands with my classmates, but my thoughts: first, it was to accept that it was a tremor, I tried to calm down, I thought about my family, about my youngest sister and my dad. Because of the time, I knew that they were together and, to some extent, that reassured me. Then I thought about my twelve-year-old brother, who is in his first year of secondary school, but just a few months ago he was in elementary school and my parents used to take him and pick him up along with my little sister; I still could not believe that he would arrive alone to his school. It was his entry time and he was alone, I was afraid of losing him and not seeing him again. That was when I felt a great desolation. Then, I thought about my mother, at the end, because deep down I knew that she was fine because I know her work area. Then, I thought of myself: will I be able to survive? Will I be able to get out of this place aware? Will I reunite with my family? Is it going to hurt me? What will happen to me?... I remember every instant, every moment, every action, every noise...

The floor was shaking brutally, a deep crunch was heard, the second level or third floor of my school moved back and forth, the windows jiggled, you could hear the cables moving, but that was not the worst, many ideas kept passing through my mind. I thought that I would stay there, really. I felt my body very hard and tense, I think that I was just waiting for the moment to receive and feel the rubble on me.

I thought about every pleasant moment that had marked my life, like when I was little and I played with my cousins, the time when I acted in kindergarten, or every Monday when I was part of the “*escorta*” (flag escort), or that I ran the civic program, plus those two days unique in my life, when I found out that I would have two life companions: my brothers.

I also thought about the bad times that I had been through. Many images came to my mind... They were only seconds or minutes, but I felt them as if they were really eternal, because the movement did not stop nor the crunching under our feet; I felt how the earth moved more each time and stronger.

The same movement, joined with the fact that we were holding hands, made us reel. I felt the need to step back and I pulled my classmates. When I looked up again, the worst began, I saw too much dust and I heard a very impressive roar... My glasses fogged up and my face got all the dust, I felt how some stones went into my sneakers. I knew that the school was falling down and I saw what I supposed: rubble, rocks... and a boy... a boy lying among that rubble, with his mouth and eyes opened, I do not know why, I looked him in the eyes and I could feel his pain... That day I learned that his name was Brandon, that he was an alumnus and that he was there visiting.

The floor was still vibrating and the movement was getting more intense every moment; I only wanted everything to end, I wanted to get out of there alive... When the intensity began to diminish, the principal said: “Get out of the building!” my classmates were still in shock and I had to pull them out. Those three meters from where we were until the exit, were eternal. I prayed in my thoughts so that nothing would fall on us as we moved, we had to jump among the pieces of construction because part of the corridor of the second level, which was the canopy, fell off; there was where Brandon got trapped, and we walked around him to not expose him anymore. Almost upon reaching the fence there was a girl lying with her leg injured, bleeding and showing the tissue of her muscle. Once again, the emotion was big and we felt terribly impotent, we understood that we were not prepared for those circumstances... We all prayed that the structure would not continue to fall.

When we managed to get out of school, buildings, poles and light cables were still moving. Outside, the confusion was greater because the transients, everyday neighbors and tourists, who stopped their way to shelter themselves, saw a huge cloud come out from the preparatory school. Of the schoolfellow, the ones that we had already gathered outside, some were crying, others were still impressed, and no one knew what had happened exactly. When I saw

Yuicelik I realized that she was crying, I hugged her, and among all her tears she said: "Mine, my little sister, my little sister does not come out!" I started crying, because I also thought about my brother, who was studying two blocks from where I was, also in an old house, and I did not know if the same thing had happened as here. We both felt that great fear. I tried to calm her down and reassure myself, I told her: "Everything will be fine and I will not leave you until we find her".

We started looking for her among all the people who were in the street, we shouted her name several times, we kept looking in opposite sides to find it faster, until finally I saw them hugging and crying together when they found each other. After, the two of them thanked me for helping them, and although I felt good for having seen them together, I still felt the fear and anguish of not seeing my brother again.

We heard the voices of some teachers who told us to go to the Main Theatre, because it has an esplanade and is a block and a half from the preparatory school. I still did not believe what was happening. Just thirty meters away, I stopped at the corner of the Casa de Alfeñique, an exemplary construction of Baroque art at the end of the eighteenth century, and for a few seconds my mind evoked what I had experienced a few minutes before. I felt the tremor in my body again, then I breathed deeply and felt a slight pull in my hand, it was Yuicelik who told me: Let's go! When walking a block and a half, which is the distance between my prep school and the theatre, I felt that the earth was moving, but I will never know if it was really happening or if it was a reaction of my body.

When arriving to the Main Theatre, there were too many people who neither believed nor knew what had just happened, they only had their own experience. The classmates of the prep school began to gather in the middle of the esplanade, the teachers gathered us by groups and asked us if we knew where the others were. The situation became more and more distressing; we were all so vulnerable...

Suddenly, I saw my schoolmate Shakti arrive, she was alone and crying inconsolably. I hugged her and told her that everything would be fine, without imagining the news that she was going to tell me. She hugged me and, in a voice broken by pain, told me: "Paola..." and she continued crying. I asked her: "What happened? Where is she?". "Inside the school, she stayed there...", she replied. At that moment I did not understand what she was saying to me, until she could draw the strength to say: "We were both sitting on the yellow patio bench when it started to shake. I said to her: come, let's go to the center, and

I was holding her hand when I felt that something pulled her, but I kept on walking. The principal and everyone started to gather and I thought that she was still around. When I was able to look back, I saw her lying down, with rubble on top of her. I was caught among so many schoolmates, until they all started to get out and I ran to get her out, but a man stopped me and said: 'No, girl, you save yourself, leave her there!', and he pulled me to get out of there". Her crying was never interrupted while she was telling me, and immediately I started crying too, with much pain, since I knew Paola since kindergarten, we were very close friends at that time, and life had given us the opportunity to meet again in prep school.

I did not believe it, I only thought: why her? Why in that way? Why if she was so nice, so intelligent, kind and... so happy? When I calmed down, I noticed that Shakti had her hand full of blood and a huge scrape. So I asked for water, in a broken voice, and trying to shout: "Does anyone have water and paper? Please!" I repeated it and my classmate Citlalli gave them to me. I helped her wash the wound and I noticed that her white sweater also had blood... With what she had just told me, I thought more about my family, about my brother mainly, because I knew that my father had gone to pick up my sister and that, if something had happened to them, at least they were together. I knew that my mom worked in a more or less secure area, but my brother, my brother was the one who worried me, and I had no way of communicating with him. I decided to go and ask to his school no matter what they would tell me, I only wanted to know where he was, at least to know that I would have someone by my side. Neither I knew if I would have the happiness of seeing my family again.

When I arrived I did not know what to ask or what to say, there were so many ideas in my mind... there were two people at the exit and I asked them if there were children inside the school. They said, no, that they had gone to the esplanade of the Main Theatre, which was from where I came. I went back and saw some children with their parents, I asked them if they were from my brother's school and they said no; I continued my search and found my dad with my eight-year-old sister, I felt calm and I told my schoolmates that I was leaving with them. All I wanted was to get out of there, tell them everything that had happened.

We tried to communicate with my mom and home, but the network had become saturated and it was not possible. I still did not believe it, there were so many impressions and it was getting worse. I told my dad that I had already gone to look for my brother to school, so we started walking back, because as a family we have a strategic meeting point between our schools and where we

live; besides, public transportation had been diverted. We walked eleven blocks up to the church of Ocotlan, to the east of the city, because nearby we have another house and we thought it was a possibility. It was around fifteen minutes, but for me it felt eternal. I thought it was very late and it was not even two o'clock. We did not find him, so it only remained the faith and hope that he had gone home. We went in a minibus towards home, they were all full, so it took us longer than usual to be able to get in; when we finally boarded one, everyone was frightened, confused by what had happened.

We arrived home and there was my little brother, sitting in silence. When he saw us, he was touched and we breathed a sigh of relief... I could not stand it anymore with so much pain, with everything I had lived in less than two hours, so we sat down and I started crying. I told everything to my dad in front of my little siblings, although my intention was not to scare them; however, I had to do it because I could not bear a second more. It was very difficult to narrate it. After, I sent a message to my mom telling her that we were all well at home.

I was just thinking about those moments, whether it had been real or everything was a nightmare. A great nightmare, to tell the truth. My mom arrived two hours later; she also had a very big story to tell during our search. When she saw me, she hugged me and said to me that she was grateful to the Creator because we were all well; she was very concerned because she found out that there were wounded people in my school. I told her what had happened to me and she was very impressed because she went to look for my brother and me, and she already knew the situation of the wounded people in prep school, but she was more distressed to know that, among them, was Paola. I do not know which of the two was worse. We cried together for several hours, on the one hand we were grateful for being together, and on the other, we felt Paola as if she belonged to the family, and we prayed that she would resist, so that she and the others would fight for their lives, although we did not know the others.

Between the schoolmates we were already communicating in order to know how we were and the state of Paola. My crying seemed endless and my grandmother, eighty-nine-years-old, told my parents to take me to the doctor. Although I wanted to restrain myself, I could not, so my mom phoned my uncle, who is a psychologist and, by phone, we talked. I followed his instructions, I answered what he asked me, and little by little my body and my mind relaxed until I calmed down and stopped crying.

I tried to distract myself for a while by watching TV with my siblings, but I really did not stop thinking about it. Unfortunately, around eight o'clock at night we were informed of the death of our childhood schoolmate and friend, Ana Paola; when I told my mom, again I cried with her.

I was afraid it would tremble again, so I prepared my contingency backpack. When I put on my pajamas for sleeping, I took off my sneakers and, as I expected, some rocks came out, they were tiny, but I felt them like those huge pieces of my school in ruins. However, they had few dust, I just shook them and I put them back on. I was so scared, I did not know what to do and I just thought: if it ever trembles again, what would I do? Would I survive? The last information after the death, was the data on the wake and the reception hours.

We took down three mattresses and went to bed on the ground floor of my house. That night was the most difficult of my life, I could not sleep, and when I managed to fall asleep, the shocking images appeared. My mom had to wake me up because my breathing and my body expressed my suffering. Although she persuaded me to sleep without my shoes, I did not take them off, all the time I was on alert in case anything happened, I just wanted to survive.

After that night, I woke up and I was grateful to be alive. I was analyzing and beginning to believe what had happened to us the day before. I got into the shower and my fears returned. I became very vulnerable again, I had a lot of anguish and I thought again: what happens if it trembles again? I am not ready to feel the movement of the earth, even if it is minimal, I do not want to feel it again.

The next day I was going to a funeral at my sixteen years, the most incredible thing was that she was the same age as me and that was difficult to process. When my mom and I arrived at the wake, the cumulus of emotions was impressive. For me it was very contrasting, on the one hand I was very happy to see my schoolmates and friends, and on the other, the reason for our encounter was the irreparable loss of Ana Paola.

Around her coffin there were many flowers and balloons, I arranged the white roses that we took there and I did not have the strength nor the courage to say goodbye to her. Among prayers and songs, the cries and laments of all of us could be heard. It was very touching to see her loved ones. Finally, there was a mass of present body and a farewell. At that moment we all fell into an inconsolable cry; it was very difficult.

Schoolmates, family, friends and teachers, we all went to bury her. When the coffin was covered by the earth, we began to arrange the flowers and, like a queen, dressed in flowers, that is how her grave was. All united by the same person, too cute in every way, with a smile and a laugh that I will never forget. She remains engraved in my heart.

The legacy of this experience is that life is beautiful and our actions are the body of our history. Today, more than three months ago, I write to make that day a transcendent experience, that is why I will love life intensely, with passion, in order to achieve my dreams.