

**THE VILLAGE BURIAL
SOCIETY**

Robert F. Clark

TO MARIE

Copyright 2010 by Robert F. Clark

**THE WORLD BANK
OFFICE MEMORANDUM**

DATE: January 1, 20**

TO: Rafael Celeste, Vice President, Poverty
Reduction Group

FROM: Gabriela Diaz, Lead Interviewer
Catherine Virtue Walker, Social Science
Analyst

SUBJECT: Interview with Angel Estrada

As you requested, we are attaching a smoothed out version of our interview with the Peñurian farmer Angel Estrada. The day-long interview took place last June 20 at his home in the village of El Alto, located in southeastern Peñuria. Because of his weakened condition, we had to take several breaks. Señor Estrada has since died. His wife Serafina is trying to avoid eviction from their family farm. A local NGO is acting on her behalf but the outcome remains uncertain.

attachment

ATTACHMENT

SESSION 1

Yes, I'm Angel. Come in, both of you. Watch your head, the door is low. Have a seat there, on that bench in the corner. No, no, stay there. I am comfortable on the floor. I can rest my back against the wall. There, now what were you saying?

You want me to talk about my life? How strange. Most outsiders look right through me. It's like I am a piece of glass. You're from the World Bank? Sorry, I've never heard of your organization. If you are from a bank, how much will you pay me to answer your questions? Nothing? Well, I don't know about that.

I'm not feeling well and my wife is not here. Maybe you should find someone else to talk to. You say you went to see our village headman, Rafael? He said that you should come talk to me? Rafael is a good man. He told you that I had memories of many years ago? Well, all right. I will talk to you. If he says you're okay, that's good enough for me. I finished the planting yesterday so I have a little time. I was going to repair the roof but that will have to wait. I'm very tired. It's hard to stand. I'm better off here on the floor.

Maybe it's good that you don't make any promises. That way we start off understanding each other. Maybe you will see what it's like for us. Will you have some tea? Serafina made some just before she left.

You might have seen her on the road carrying a water jar. What does she look like? Very much like the other women in the village, I guess, at least to outsiders. She is taller than most of the women, about as tall as I am, and stands up straight. Most of the women are bent over from carrying heavy loads but Serafina has always been very strong. Her parents told her when she was a girl that she must always

stand up straight no matter how heavy the load she was carrying.

She was wearing a *bombin* or what you outsiders call a bowler hat, a red shawl around her shoulders, several colored skirts and a pair of rubber tire sandals. Her black hair hangs down in back in two long braids. According to Serafina, the women believe that the *bombins* helped them bear more children. The colors of the skirts tell what village they come from. Young girls are dressing more and more in the modern way. The older ones continue to wear their traditional clothing.

When she was young Serafina was the prettiest girl in the district. Many men from other villages wanted her to marry them. But she chose me. And although we have had many troubles in our life together she has stayed with me.

Here in the High Plain everybody is poor. Maybe it's that way on the coast too but I've never been down there. Peñuria is a big country. The farthest I've traveled is to Oczuc. Government people sometimes come from there and make promises. They'll open a clinic or build a road or start a school. The village gets stirred up. There are meetings. In the end nothing much happens.

When people come here and see how poor we are, they think we know nothing about the modern world. We hear about cell phones and computers and televisions but nobody here can afford these things. Careful, those cups are chipped. I'll buy some new ones once we get a little money. If you want you can put that recorder on the floor instead of holding it. Are you sure you're comfortable? The house must seem small and dark to you.

I built this house myself before Serafina and I were married. It was my wedding present to her. How did I do it? Why, like everyone else up here, I mixed water and mud and straw, put them in a mold and baked them in the kiln out back to make bricks. Boys learn how to build houses from their fathers. Wood is scarce, so we use it for fires. The mud bricks are strong.

The walls of the house have held up but I have to replace the thatch on the roof every year or so. The thatch? You

people don't know much about life here, do you. Thatch is a kind of straw made from maize. Look up. You can see some holes I need to patch. When it rains, the water comes through and we have to go to the corners to stay dry. If I don't do something about it, the water will weaken the mud brick walls and the house could fall down.

I patch as much as possible instead of putting on a whole new roof because the thatch costs money. Two thousand soles, can you imagine. You say that is about one hundred dollars in your money? I don't know about that. All I know is that it would take me at least two months to earn that much.

One of our neighbors bought long strips of zinc for his roof. It lasts forever so he doesn't have to worry about replacing it. He says it's noisy when the rain hits the roof but his home stays dry. I could never afford a zinc roof for this house. I would like a wooden floor but the wood rots after a while and we would have to replace that too. So we get along with these dirt floors. I would feel rich if we had a house that didn't leak, a bed, and a pair of shoes.

No, we don't have a car. No one in this village who does. Even if we could afford one, we would not be able to buy gas. The road in and out of here is hard on cars and trucks. During the rainy season the road is washed out. If the car broke down we could not afford to have it fixed.

Serafina and I walk to most places but we ride our bicycles if we have to travel to another village. We don't use the bicycles any more than we have to in order to keep them in good condition. It's easy to get a flat tire on the road. I've patched the tires many times on my bike but soon I will have to buy new ones.

You'd like to talk to Serafina after we finish? I'm sorry but she never talks to outsiders. In the past she's had some bad experiences. She doesn't like it when I talk to people we don't know. So many outsiders want something from us. You look like honest people to me, so I'm taking a chance with you. Poor people have to be careful, you know.

You want to know about farming in the High Plain? Farming up here is hard. We don't have much land to start with. My farm is hilly and rocky. I have had to remove many

rocks to make the soil ready for sowing. The winds blow away the good soil and what's left is almost bare. Years ago we had enough fertilizer for the crops but no more. We use every inch of the land for planting. I would feel rich if we had a house that didn't leak, a bed, and a pair of shoes.

It's dry a lot of the year, but during the rainy season floods can wash away our crops. For many years we had good crops because we knew when the rains would come. No longer. We can go for a long time with no rain and the crop fails. Some years Serafina and I produce a nice crop of potatoes and we have enough to eat. Other years though . . . well, if Serafina didn't keep up her garden in back of the house we would starve.

We help each other in this village. When we have good crops and we can't sell what is left over, we give the potatoes away. It is better to do that than to let them rot. If one of our neighbors has a bad crop we give them some of our potatoes instead of trying to sell them. They would do the same for us. That's not to say we always get along with all our neighbors. Sometimes we quarrel over who has the right to a piece of land, or who stole an animal, or why one family won't let a daughter marry the son in another family.

How many people live in this village? I would guess several hundred. Most of us get by growing potatoes or maize or quinoa. I have a couple of cows for milk. I used to let them wander outside in the rain, wind and cold nights. A farm agent from Oczuc said that if we kept them warm at night the cows would give more milk. He was right! I made a stall for them and, sure enough, they gave more milk. When they have enough to eat they can give up to four liters of milk a day instead of two. But the cows are very thin and it is hard for them to find enough forage. So we can't depend on them for milk when we go through floods or long droughts.

I also keep a small herd of llamas, about twelve or thirteen. Our llamas carry our crops to the local market. In the past I have had to kill a couple of llamas in order for us to have something to eat. I try not to do that because it is expensive to replace a llama. If we have to kill one, Serafina uses the skin to make clothes. She works with other women

in the village to weave the llama skins into rugs that they sell to tourists.

The worst time I remember was the year when the floods washed away the crops of all the villagers. We had bad hunger that year. Nobody had enough food for his own children. If a man is hungry and can't feed his family, how can he help his neighbor? That year people died from lack of food, mostly children and old men and women.

Some people stole animals from their neighbors for food. I never did that. I did not want my children to think that stealing was all right. If I were arrested and put in jail, they would have no one to provide for them. Serafina could not manage the farm and raise the children by herself. Besides, the church tells us that stealing the property of another person is an offense against God. Even if you are starving it is better to keep your self-respect.

Most of the time, even during the bad times, we get along with one another. When there are village get-togethers, like baptisms or weddings or harvest festivals, everybody forgets their differences and has a good time. For a few hours we forget how poor we are!

We don't go to Oczuc if we can help it. It's the biggest city in the province. The people there have jobs, they drive cars, they live in nice houses, and they have plenty to eat. We say here that the rich have one job and they are comfortable. The poor have many jobs and must fight to live. It seems to me that more and more of the Oczuceños are fat. They act like they own the world. They think poor people like me exist to serve them.

And they look down on us. How do we know? We can tell. The way they look at each other when we ask a question. The shake of the head when we make our mark instead of writing out our names. The comments about our patched-up clothes. When it is cold, I wear my poncho and *chullo*, this wool hat with earflaps. In Oczuc children run after me pointing and laughing. I've learned to keep my head down and act as if everything was okay.

The Oczuceños think we are lazy. I wish they would come to our village and see how hard it is to work in the

fields. If we did not take care of the llamas or plant crops even when we don't feel well, we would not survive. And I do not just farm. Whenever the district government needs workers I sign up. The jobs don't last more than a few days, a couple of weeks at most, but they bring a little more money into the house.

Last month I was bitten by a stray dog in the village and my left leg swelled up. I could hardly stand. My wife Serafina tried to take care of me but the herbs she used did not heal the wound. A district health worker who came to our village said I needed to see a doctor or I would die. Finally we borrowed some money to take the bus to the hospital in Oczuc. At the hospital in Oczuc patients are lined up in the corridors in long rows waiting for a doctor. We waited for hours in the emergency room but nobody paid us any attention.

At that hospital they take care of the people who are well dressed and have money or know someone in charge who can speak for them. We had to beg the receptionist to call a doctor. The woman finally said okay but first she took all the money we had. We don't know if she turned it over to the doctor or kept it.

The doctor who examined my wound prescribed some cream that he called an antibiotic. His fee was high and the medicine was very expensive. Serafina had to pawn a ring her mother had given her in order to pay the doctor and buy the medicine. She cried because she had worn that ring every day since her mother died. I don't know if we will ever be able to get it back.

I heard a story of a man who went to the hospital with a broken leg. He couldn't afford the anesthesia so they operated without it. The neighbor who told me this says he can still hear the man's screams.

Some pregnant women don't even try to go to the hospital in Oczuc at all. They say that going to the hospital is like going to prison. You are treated like a criminal, even though you are ready to give birth. Instead the women stay at home and the village midwife comes to help with the birth. If

a doctor tells them that they should go to the hospital, they ignore him.

Serafina doesn't understand why a woman would want to go to the hospital to give birth. Birth and motherhood are nothing new to a young girl up here. She had our children at home. At home giving birth is a family matter, not something done in a hospital in front of strangers. She had seen her own younger brothers and sisters being born in her parents' home and she knew what to expect. Like every other family hers raised llamas and she saw those animals give birth many many times while she was growing up. She knew that giving birth meant pain but that afterwards there was great joy.

The midwives help with bringing the baby out. A midwife is like a grandmother. She has given birth herself and she can tell the young woman what to expect. What doctor in a hospital can do that? When she looks into the eyes of the midwife the new mother feels a bond with all the mothers of our people who have given birth before her.

The midwife talks to the mother during the contractions. Right after the birth the midwife moves the baby to the mother's arms and breasts. The baby is still breathing through the cord that ties it to the mother. The baby suckles at his mother's breasts. Then the cord is cut, the fluid in the baby's lungs flows out and the baby begins to breathe on its own. A new baby and its mother are rarely apart.

When do women start having babies? Usually by the time they are eighteen. It is rare for woman to give birth after age twenty-five. They have their babies when they are young and strong. They know how to take care of their new baby. Mothers give the milk from their breasts for many months instead of the formula milk the hospital passes out.

At home they wrap them well to protect them against the winds and rain and carry their babies around on their backs in a sling. They nurse their babies as often as needed, maybe twenty or thirty times a day. Mother and baby stay close together even at night for a couple of years. The baby never has to worry about a midnight snack! In the High Plain children are a gift from God. The mothers up here take better care of their children than they do of themselves.

Serafina also told me of a woman in her village who started out for the hospital but had to give birth under a tree because she did not have enough money for the bus fare to Oczuc. They say that babies born in the hospital in Oczuc are more likely to live than those born at home here in the district. I don't believe that.

Even if a pregnant woman manages to get to the hospital, she usually has to wait many hours for someone to help with the delivery. In the hospital they give the woman drugs to lessen the pain of giving birth. Serafina thinks that the drugs the woman takes are passed along to the little one in her womb. That can't be a good thing. Serafina never took drugs and she says that the birth pains made her feel at one with all the other mothers who have given birth for thousands of years.

And the nurses take the baby away from its mother right after it is born. That is another thing that Serafina doesn't understand. She says it is necessary that the mother and the new baby stay together to get used to each other. Many parts of the hospital are dirty. The bad food and the rude staff only make things worse. Many babies are lost because the women do not get the attention and medicines they need.

You say you are surprised that a man up here would talk about such matters. Well. . . you see. . . What was I saying? I think we had better stop. I need to close my eyes for a while. .

SESSION 2

Where were we? Oh, yes. You were asking about men and women and how they get along..

Serafina and I learned a long time ago that it was good for us to talk to one another. I tell her my problems and she tells me hers. We don't have subjects that are just for women or just for men. Our lives are hard but they would be harder if we did not talk to each other.

Some of the men laugh at me for spending so much time with my wife. They want me to join them in their dice games. I do that once in a while but I mostly prefer to stay at home. I think they are the ones who are missing something. Rafael the headman knows how I feel. I imagine that is one of the reasons he sent you to see me. If a husband and wife talk with one another, they can help one another when one of them gets sick and needs to see a doctor.

Once in a while we see doctors or nurses who want to help us and do their best to cure our sicknesses and heal our wounds. They tell us what we must do to take care of ourselves and they make sure we can get the medicines we need without being overcharged. If we didn't have a chance of running into one of those people, I would never go to a hospital. But the good ones are busy and many others make demands on their time.

We need our own clinic in this village to take care of pregnant women and people who get sick. Of course even if we had a place like that it would be hard for a doctor or nurse to come live here. At least the district sends health workers here from time to time.

In this village we work hard all day but we still go to bed hungry. You can patch torn clothes but how do you patch an empty stomach? I'm tired most of the time. Some days I can hardly drag myself from this house to the field out back. I ask myself, why did I have to wake up, why could I not have died in my sleep? But I have to get up if we want to eat.

I'm sorry about the house. I need to patch the holes but I haven't had time to make the mud plaster. I'll get to it soon

because the nights are very cold up here. Maybe tomorrow I'll feel stronger. Lately I feel tired all the time.

Last week something very strange happened. Suddenly while I was walking back home from the field my right arm and leg stopped working. I couldn't move. Serafina tried to talk to me but I couldn't understand her. I couldn't see very well; something was clouding my eyes. I felt dizzy and could hardly stand up. The condition lasted for many minutes and even after I could move again I felt very weak. I was frightened.

You say that I might have had a stroke. I don't know what that is. I should see a doctor? I wish I had time for that. Even if I could go to the hospital in Oczuc I couldn't afford to pay what the doctor would charge. If I had to stay in the hospital Serafina and I would have to bring our own dishes and bed covers. Since we don't have a bed, I would have to sleep on the hospital floor if they wouldn't give me a cot. No, I'll just have to hope that the, what did you call it, the stroke doesn't come back.

The biggest problem here is always money. Not long ago my cousin Ramona wanted to borrow money to buy medicine for her husband. "He's dying, Angel," she said. "We've got to save him. If he dies, I'll have no one." She started crying. But I told her no, I couldn't give her any money. If I did, I wouldn't have enough to buy clothes for the grandchildren. And fertilizer, she has no idea how much that costs!

Money doesn't go as far as it used to. On the radio they talk about the high prices of everything. Maybe that's why I can't afford a bag of fertilizer. No, I told my cousin, I had no money to spare. She started to curse me. I finally walked away.

Yes, I said grandchildren. My age? The church in the next village keeps records on who was baptized there. According to Serafina, who learned how to read, my record says that I was baptized fifty years ago. But my parents did not have their children baptized right after they were born. Instead they waited a couple of years. As near as I can tell, I'm fifty-two or fifty-three years old.

You don't have to say anything. I know you think I look much older. That's because I can't stand up straight, my hair is white, my hands are all curled, I've lost some teeth. But I can still get around. I can still work. I have to in order to support Serafina and the grandchildren.

Most of the people that I grew up with, especially the men, have died by now. You might say that I'm one of the lucky ones. Though most days I have doubts about that. I expect to die any time now.

According to our custom, Serafina will invite the whole village to my funeral and put on a big meal. People will bring gifts but they will not be enough to pay for the expense of my funeral. That will be covered by the burial society. Every family in the village turns over a little money every month to the burial society. We use the money in the savings account to pay for funerals. We may be poor but when someone dies people pay the proper respect.

Death is no stranger to us here in the High Plain. Serafina and I had five children. One died right after being born, two others didn't last out their first year. The other two don't live here in the High Plain any more. We used to be close but that has changed.

My daughter and her husband moved to Oczuc hoping to find work. My daughter hates to leave her children at home alone but she has to while she goes from door to door trying to sell clothes she has made. Her husband hires out as a laborer but there hasn't been much construction work in Oczuc lately because of the rains. He spends his days in the main plaza waiting for foremen to come by in their trucks. If he and his friends aren't picked up by noon, they go off and drink together.

My daughter and her husband fight a lot. When he comes home drunk he sometimes beats her. She never talks about it but I have seen the marks on her. I think he feels ashamed that she earns more money than he does.

My son? He disappeared about three years ago after his wife died. My daughter tells me he is living with a woman somewhere on the coast and that he spends his money on drugs. He doesn't have a regular job and my daughter thinks

he makes money by selling drugs on the street. If he goes on this way he will end up in jail—if he doesn't die first. The path of drugs is a path to death.

We are raising his children, a boy and his younger sister. Serafina worries all the time about the girl. She's so thin and she complains about being tired. One day she fell asleep while helping Serafina grind flour. I am angry with my son. He should be here doing the best he can for his children. He is not welcome back into this house.

Some families are lucky enough to receive money from their children who have moved to the coast where they have good jobs. I even know of a family whose son went to America, California I think, where he works as a waiter in a fancy restaurant. He sends money to his mother Helena who lives alone here. She would starve without that money. She tells me he has even bought a house for his family! Imagine, owning your own home in America. He wants his mother to come live with them but she is afraid to leave the High Plain. This is the only life she knows.

Water is as important for us as air. Water means life. Without water my llamas would die. Without water I could not irrigate my land and sow any seed. Without water Serafina cannot cook or wash clothes. When we have drought, there is death all around.

Serafina has gone to the well for water. It will take her a while because the line is long at this time of the morning. The government installed a well with a pump near our farm but it stopped working a few months ago and no one has come around to repair it. The next time the district leader comes here I will tell him about the problem . . . if I am still alive. These days Serafina has to walk a long way for our water.

Serafina spends many hours every day walking to the well, filling her jar and carrying it back home. She stands in a long line to get to the water. Of course the women talk and that slows things down. When drought comes some women break into the line and she must fight for a chance to get to the well. Leaves and other waste fall in and contaminate the water. The water is dirty brown and it smells. I sometimes dream of clear spring water in my sleep. But then of course I

wake up. A district health care worker came to the village once and told us that we should boil the water before we drink it. Otherwise it will make us sick.

And we have had sickness here. About ten years ago, a lot of people in the village came down with cholera. That's what the nurse who came to see us called it. People got sick to their stomachs; they ran outside to shit all day long; they got leg cramps; they complained of feeling very dry. The district health representative said that the outbreak was due to germs being spread from the outdoor toilets.

When the rains came it washed a lot of the toilet matter into the streams that feed the wells. The district health person gave the sick people clean water with a mix of sugar and salt and told them to drink a lot of it. It seemed to help but for some victims it was too late. My mother died from cholera.

We boil our water when we can but wood is scarce. Not many trees grow this high above the coast. Besides, if we cut down a lot of the trees that survive up here for their wood, the soil becomes loose. Some of it slides into the streams that flow down from the mountains around us. When I was a boy I used to fish in a stream that ran through some woods. Later all the trees were chopped down by people in this district for firewood. After a while the stream was filled with dirt and the water flow slowed down and finally stopped. It overtopped the banks and weakened the soil even more. Now there are no fish. And the stream no longer runs down this far.

Right now we have no money. We harvested the potato crop last month. I had to sell what we couldn't use right away. If I could wait for a month or two, the price would rise but I have no way to store the crop for that long. Our village has only one road. It's full of ruts and potholes. I've seen trucks riding on it lose an axle. The bus from Oczuc comes through our village once a week. The company says it may stop coming here because the road is in bad shape and it costs too much to maintain the buses.

If I had a truck and the roads were better I might be able to take my potato crop to the markets in Oczuc where I could get a better price. Instead traders from Oczuc come here and buy our crops at a low price. Then they go to other

towns and villages where they make a big profit. Sometimes those same traders come back here with their leftover potatoes. To get enough to eat, we have to buy them back at a higher price than we sold them for in the first place.

Of course a better road might not do me much good. I would need a truck to take my potatoes to the other villages. It costs money to buy a truck and it costs money to keep a truck. If you walk outside this village you will see a several abandoned trucks rusting away. The owners couldn't afford gas or repairs.

No, don't get me wrong, I am not against better roads. They would make it easier for us to go to the post office and the community center. I might even be able to get a job to go along with my farming. And the district health workers could get here more often, even during the rainy season. Now they often cancel their visits because the roads are washed out. Maybe even the police would come to patrol our village because, as I said, lately we have had more crime here than ever before.

Who knows, maybe one of your big American companies would open up a clothing plant here. Wouldn't that be something!

Around election time the district leader Miguel comes by and promises that if we vote for him he will make sure that the road from our village to Oczuc is paved. We've heard that before and we know better than to believe him. Once the district even started paving the road but after the election the work stopped.

I asked him once why we can never get a school in our village. He said that the education office in Oczuc won't come up with the money for building a school or paying teachers' salaries. They tell him that we already have a school in another village in the district. The money they have in the education office they spend to build up the University of Oczuc. "We need highly trained people for the kind of jobs that will help the Peñurian economy," they say. "The university is where our young people get that training."

Personally I wonder how many children in the High Plain are supposed to get into a university if they do not learn to

read and write. No, universities are for the people with money. It's the same story over and over.

I am not angry with Miguel. He is a good fellow. He listens to us and always buys drinks for the men. We know he can't come through with most of the things he promises to do for us but we always go ahead and vote for him anyway. If we didn't he could make things worse for us. The other people who come here looking for our votes are not as friendly as Miguel. They always look like they are in a hurry to get to the next village. So we listen to their speeches and forget about them when they move on.

Electricity? We dream about electricity. Miguel says he is working on it. He has been saying that for the last ten years. He says that the papers are stuck somewhere in an office in Oczuc. Probably someone there wants a bribe to move them forward. The rich are better able to pay what it takes than we who live in these poor villages. I don't expect that we will get electricity here in my lifetime but I hope the grandchildren will have better luck.

Just think. If we had electricity in our house, we wouldn't need to use candles. We always worry that the grandchildren will knock over the candles and start a fire. And if they could put lights up along the road! People would not be so afraid to go out at night. Right now if they have to go out in the dark they take a flashlight and a big stick to beat off the dogs. The lighting would help cut down on the robberies and the attacks on women. Now women who live alone blow out their candles and lock their doors as soon as the sun goes down.

In summer we work in the fields but in the winter it can get so cold that it's hard to move around. Now that I am an old man it is even harder. My bones hurt whenever I take a step. I try not to drink much water in the winter because it is too cold to get up at night and go outside for a piss.

I had to trade some potatoes with one of our neighbors for school uniforms for the grandchildren. Luckily our neighbor's children had outgrown them. They even gave us shirts and pants for the boy and skirts for the girls. It is important for the children to look decent at school or the other children—even some of the teachers—will laugh at

them. The uniforms are torn in places but at least the grandchildren don't look out of place.

We don't have many potatoes left. Serafina grinds up the potatoes, mixes them with oil and bakes them to make bread. Some days she just boils them. We drink tea. It's not enough. At night the grandchildren wake up with stomachaches and cry because they are hungry. Some days we have to send the grandchildren off to the district school without any breakfast. We tell them we will have a treat for them by dinner. That's not true but it's enough to get them out of the house.

On days when there is no school, Serafina and I eat only one meal so that the grandchildren can have two. They are young and their bodies are growing. It is more important for them to get something to eat than it is for us old people.

The grandchildren cry because it is so cold in the early morning when they leave for school. It takes the children an hour to walk to the school which is in the next village. At least they get a free lunch there. The school district provides the children's lunches. I just wish the food was better. The grandchildren have forgotten the taste of meat and sugar.

Serafina stopped by the school once during the lunch hour. She told me that our two grandkids are put at a separate table with other poor children and the food they get for lunch is old and stale, much worse than what the children get at the other tables. Children can't learn unless the school gives them good food to eat.

I went to the school to talk to Señora Imelda, the head teacher. She said that the grandchildren were lucky to be getting anything at all since they are eating from other people's money. I told her that besides raising my potatoes I worked for the district when they needed crews for repairing the roads. I've helped other farmers install their irrigation systems. And I serve on the village council in my own village. I have done my share for the community.

She acted as if that kind of work was nothing. She was looking down her nose at me like she was doing a favor by even talking to me. She said that other families help the school by buying chalk and giving the teachers gifts. But we never do.

The head teacher's attitude made me angry. I told her that public schools were supposed to be free but the books and school fees cost more than a poor family can afford. The teachers expect gifts from the children. They also sell pens and notebooks for the children. If we don't buy them, the children have no way of taking part in the classroom activities. The school should give them away since they come free from the government. Some of the teachers do not seem to care about the children. They are there only for the money. And the building—broken windows, paint peeling off the walls, drafty classrooms—she should do something about that.

I could see her lips get tighter when I said these things. She said that the salaries of the teachers are very low and very often they are not paid on time. They have to make additional money any way they can. The district does not give the school enough money to repair the building. She accused me of being an ignorant farmer who knows nothing about running a school.

Now I worry that she will take it out on the grandchildren—beat them, charge them extra fees that we cannot afford, give them low marks. I've heard of other teachers doing that to the children of poor families. But no matter what happens I am determined that our grandchildren get an education.

I never used to worry that I could not read and write so long as I could put food on the table. I know how to farm but I did not know how to read the loan papers from the bank in Oczuc. And I have been cheated at stores when they saw that I could not add up the cost of things I was buying.

Also, I see now that my son and daughter would have been better off if they spent more time in school. Instead I allowed them to stay home on rainy days. At harvest time I made them help me and Serafina in the fields. I am not happy with the way their lives have gone and I take the blame for that.

I won't make the same mistakes with the grandchildren. They go to school no matter what the weather. Crying doesn't help them. Serafina and I harvest the potato crop

ourselves. I pray to God that when they are grown the grandchildren will move from here and get good jobs on the coast. People in the village tell me that schooling doesn't help you find a job in the city if you have no connections. That may be true but that just means you need both.

One of my neighbors thought it was okay to educate the boy— but why the girl? He says she won't learn how to cook and take care of the house and it will make it harder for her to find a husband. She could end up as a sex worker in Oczuc. The world has changed, I tell that neighbor. Girls need an education just as much as the boys. He just shakes his head but I know I'm right.

The school in the next village is more than a school. It has windows and concrete floors and a zinc roof. It is the only place in the area with electricity and running water and it is where we go for district meetings. There is even a television set. Even though the building is in bad shape, Serafina and I look forward to going there. Sometimes when we arrive they stick a little round disk into it that shows a movie. And it is free! It is like taking a vacation. We get a chance to talk and visit with people from the other villages in the district. It seems that everyone is having a hard time these days.

Serafina was born in that village and she went to that school. Thank heaven her parents sent her there. Thank heaven she can read and write. Without her I would never be able to understand the loan papers I sign at the bank. Her parents didn't want her to marry me because I was an ignorant farmer. Anyway I have tried to make her life as happy as a poor man can.

Along with the television, the school has a couple of computers but I don't know anything about them. At least the grandchildren are learning how to use them, though of course we could never afford one in our home. A couple of times a year the government invites people from the villages to a district harvest festival. The harvest festival reminds us of the good things the earth has provided for us. The village people sing and perform their traditional dances. A lot of us stand around and talk and drink. Many years ago I met Serafina at one of those district parties.

I noticed her right away because she was taller than the other girls. Everyone was on the floor dancing the *huayno*, where the men try to get the women's attention and the women act like they have better things to do. In the dance she was fixing her braids while I sang and played the panpipe near her.

What did I sing? How can you expect me to remember? That happened over thirty years ago. Let me see, the words are coming back. Would you hand me that panpipe? That's it, the one on the ledge near the cooking stove. My voice is not as strong as it was but here goes: "*O pretty Indian maid - To you my heart belongs - My love will never fade - For you I sing my songs.*"

Thank you. No one has ever clapped for me before. There are more words to the song but I can't remember them. And this weakness in my body has come back.

Anyway, during the dance, Serafina finally turned her head as though it were the first time she had become aware of me. After that we danced as a couple. Even though they teased me afterwards, the other young men were jealous. Serafina was the prettiest of all the women there. Besides her father owned the biggest farm in that village. That was one of the happiest nights of my life.

Every week after that, when my work was done, I would walk over to her house in that village. It took over an hour to get there and another hour to come back. Her parents tried to discourage me but I was determined to court Serafina. Sometimes the woman comes to live with the man before they have a wedding ceremony. It's called "stealing the girl." I didn't want to do that. Instead I did everything I could to persuade her parents to let me marry her. Finally they gave their blessing. Probably they knew that one way or another Serafina and I were going to get married and decided they were better off accepting that. No sense getting off on the wrong foot. With the dowry they gave me I was able to buy a llama herd.

You want to stop here? While you are fixing your little machine, I'll close my eyes.

SESSION 3

Life on the High Plain has changed a lot since I was young. Serafina and I help each other no matter what is going on around us. I am not ashamed to admit that I depend on her as much as she depends on me. Without my wife my life would have been a waste.

We've had a problem with crime in this village. Lately gangs from Oczuc or other towns have come here at night. At last month's district meeting a couple of women said that when they went to collect firewood they were attacked and raped by a group of hoodlums with machetes. The district police promised to investigate. We'll see.

A couple of my llamas were stolen last month. When I was a young man that kind of thing never happened. If a llama strayed onto his neighbor's land, it would be returned. I have to keep a close eye on the herd during the day. My neighbors and I take turns going out at night, two together, to look out for thieves. Since I am an old man I only have to go out once every two weeks or so. The others go out more often. If I could not count on my neighbors I would lose the whole llama herd.

No, nobody has an indoor toilet in this village. Some people have an outhouse in the back but we can't afford one. We have to use the bushes. Serafina is afraid of being bitten by scorpions or attacked by one of these gangs when she is out there doing her business. The women at the village meeting said that what they needed most were more toilets and places to take a bath.

And someplace to put all the garbage! People stack the garbage in dumps behind their houses because no one from the district comes to collect it. I have had to pull the grandchildren away from garbage dumps where they were playing. I tell them they could become sick but they don't pay attention.

Both of us worry whenever the grandchildren come home late from school. They are poor but that hasn't stopped them from being robbed. The boy tries to protect his sister but he

is not strong enough to handle the bullies who follow them home.

How did I get my land? When I was growing up, my family was working on a huge estate. A latifundio? If you say so. It was really just a big farm. A rich man owned the land but he was never here. We worked the land. I and my brothers—they're both dead now—started helping my father and mother in the fields as soon as we could walk.

Our family like other families on the estate were allowed to keep a portion of the potato crop but most of it we turned over to the owner's agents. That covered the cost of food, clothing and rent for our house.

When he needed buy tools, my father would borrow money from the owner. Every month he would pay back what he could. Once in a while he would skip a month because he needed the money to buy things we needed. My parents could not read and write so they could not put down what they paid and what they still owed. They depended on the owner's agent tell them. Somehow it was never enough.

The agent told them that they were paying back not only what my father borrowed but also something more—interest, he called it. Money lending was a business, he said. You paid to borrow money just like you paid to buy things like food or clothes. The price of borrowing was the interest.

I'm sure that he charged us more interest than the landowner expected. He gave the owner part of what he collected from us and kept the rest. We didn't dare complain to the owner because the agent would have taken it out on us later. Really, the owner did not care so long as he got what he wanted from us. My father took on extra jobs to pay off what he could—night watchman, firewood collector, house servant, llama herder—but it was never enough. So long as we were on that big estate my family never got out of debt.

There were about twelve families on that big farm. All the families thought the owner took too much of the potato crop. When my parents got together with the others to talk about that, the owner sent a gang of thugs after them. If the families filed a complaint with the district court, the owner would bribe the judge to rule against them. The owner made

a nice fat living off his land but it was at our expense. When it came to elections for the district leader, the owner made sure the families voted the way he wanted them to. Or else.

When I was about fifteen, the provincial government in Oczuc announced that it was taking over all the big farms. The government claimed that the big landowners were not farming the land properly. They did not take advantage of the modern ideas that could increase food production. And they never would so long as they could exploit the cheap labor of us peasants.

The government decided that the land should be handed over to the people who worked it. That way the province would produce more food and people would be less poor. I think the same kind of change was going on in other parts of Peñuria. It didn't work out quite the way the government planned.

I don't need to tell you that the landowners were not happy. A couple of the provincial officials who came here were shot to death. No one was ever arrested for their murders. Tenant farmers like my parents were not sure what to make of the takeover but they figured it was a chance to change their situation. They marched in favor of the land reform.

Groups of thugs organized by the landowners got into fights with us farmers. There was rioting in the province. The landowners ordered the thugs to shoot any farmers who came near their latifundios. Some of us got hold of some rifles and shot back at the thugs. During one battle my father was killed. Eventually the landowners gave way after the government agreed to double the amount it paid to them for taking over their land.

I was the oldest so when the government got around to breaking up our owner's estate, I received my family's share. Other families got bigger pieces of land in better locations. Many of the farms were too small to support a family. I was too young to know the difference but we ended up with farmland that was somewhere in between. My brothers and I were happy just to have our own place—this place where you are now.

I worry about what will happen when I die. I do not have any paper that proves my ownership of this land. In this village we have always understood who owns what piece of land without needing to have it written down. But the government is trying to change our customs in this matter. They want us to fill out a form showing what land we consider to be ours and why we think so.

To do that I would need Serafina's help and we would spend weeks going from one office to another in Ozcuc. Many officials there would demand bribes to sign off on our papers. It could take months or even years for us to get the final documents. I don't have that much time. Every day for me is a day of pain.

The district leader Miguel says that because of him the district government believes this is my land. But at some point he will no longer be the district leader. That is one reason I keep voting for him. A new district leader might see things differently. I know of other farms that have been taken over by the government because the owner had not filled out the right forms. The government puts the land up for sale and the owners are left with nothing.

The situation is worse when the owner dies. While he lives the rest of the village stands behind him. They don't want the same thing to happen to them! If he dies and leaves behind a widow, the village does not give her so much support. The government has an easier time of it. I wish I knew how to safeguard my property so that it stayed in Serafina's hands after I am gone.

I asked Miguel about it once and he said that I needed to talk to a lawyer. What a joke. There are no lawyers in this district so I would have to travel to Ozcuc. If Serafina and I talked to a lawyer there for five minutes he would charge us more money than I make in a month. No, I have to find another way.

Do you have any ideas? No? Oh, that's right, you are here to talk to people and you cannot help with these kinds of problems. I don't know why you bothered to come all the way up here if you can't even offer a little advice on a matter

like this. Oh well, I guess the best I can do is to keep planting my crops and leave the rest in the hands of God.

Up here the growing season is between October and March, because that is when the weather is warmer and the rains come. We borrow money to buy seed and fertilizer. Besides potatoes, we plant quinoa and maize. For a couple of years we had good harvests. We kept a large herd of llamas. Then we fell on hard times. We lost a potato crop due to frost. One of my brothers took sick and died just before the rainy season. We had counted on him to work in the field. I borrowed money from one of our uncles to pay for the medicine but it didn't do enough good.

I said we are all poor here but some people are poorer than others. I am one of the lucky ones because most years we have enough to eat and a roof over our heads. I know a widow in this village with six children. Every day is a hard day. She raises chickens and keeps a garden. She makes the children's clothes and takes in sewing for her neighbors who spend their days in the fields. She minds the children of other families when the parents have to go to Oczuc. She does whatever she can to make a little money.

I have given her some of our potato crop and helped repair the roof on her house. Other people in the village help her also. We all knew her husband and we want to make sure his family can get along somehow.

Does the government help? We hear a lot about the money the government is spending to help the people but we don't see much of it in this village. Once in a while the government tries to start a new program but it hardly ever works out.

A couple of years ago a government man from the agriculture office in Oczuc came here. He said he was the provincial representative for the Rural Development Program. He passed out something called a voucher that we could use to buy cattle. So we did because the voucher could not be used for anything else. But the cattle they sent were not used to the weather here. When it was very hot the cattle could not find enough water. They didn't last long.

I'll give you another example. The housing ministry in Oczuc said that they would be building two hundred new houses in this district. Our village would get twenty of them and they would be given away to very poor families. The families were selected by drawing lots. The houses were supposed to come with furniture and kitchen tools but none of them ever did. We think the workmen carried them off.

According to our custom, we build square mud brick houses here. The government houses had a different shape, narrow across the front but very deep. Nobody wanted to live in them. That was just as well because the houses were built very carelessly. The walls fell down during the first flood after they were completed. I can show you the pile of dirt that is left if you like.

Later? Very well. I'll go on. Would you like more tea? No? All right then.

I will give the government some credit. They build roads, run schools, open health clinics and pass out food during the hungry season. When our crops were washed away in the floods a few years ago, we had nothing at all to eat. People, especially the old and the young children, were dying every day. The government gave out food to the villagers. There were complaints that people who paid bribes to the relief workers got more food than others. That may be true but at least we got something. Serafina and I got a bag of maize that we used to live on. It probably saved our lives and the lives of the grandchildren.

That's the government. When there is a disaster, they step in. When it's over, they leave. Most of the time we get by on our own because it makes no sense to depend on government services. And when we go somewhere for service, like the district health clinic, they treat us like dogs. They call us lazy and stupid, say we smell bad and that we are good for nothing. I needed a pair of glasses. The nurse at the clinic shouted at me that she had better things to do. I needed Serafina's help to fill out all the papers they gave me. It took me two days to get those glasses. I should go back to have my eyes examined but so long as that nurse is there I don't plan to.

The Catholic sisters who run a health clinic in the next village will come here sometimes and give the children shots for typhoid fever. The sisters are the nicest people I know. They pray to God for us and they somehow manage to get medicine for us when we cannot pay. They spend as much time with us as we need and even visit us in our homes!

Many times in my life I have decided that there cannot be a God. If there was he must be very cruel or he would not let people live the way we do. But then when the sisters come I begin to think that maybe there is a God and he is not so bad after all. I wish the sisters would open a clinic in this village but they tell me that that have a hard time keeping the one in the other village open.

A group of young people from a college in America built outdoor toilets for some families here last summer. I don't know if they are coming back this year. A new organization called the Village Credit Association began to offer loans at very low interest. Serafina borrowed some money to buy a sewing machine. But the loan was so small that she still could not afford the sewing machine. And she still had to pay the money back. I still think the Association is a good thing for our village.

Before the Village Credit Association was established we had to go to moneylenders for credit. We would borrow money for everything—seed purchases, doctor bills, dowries, roof thatch, school fees, even food. The moneylenders were quick to give us cash but God help us if we could not make the repayments. The interest rates were very high and we could never get out of debt. If we missed a payment, the moneylender would threaten us, even send men to beat us. I finally sold a piece of land to pay off my debts. Moneylenders and pawnshops—they run our lives.

The Village Credit Association seems to want to help the people in the village. Besides the low interest rates, they are willing to change the repayment schedule. That's not to say they let us off if we don't make payments. But if we have problems because a crop fails or someone in the family gets sick, they are reasonable. They just want to be sure we are doing our best to pay off the loan. Also the other members

tell the one who is behind on payments to catch up. That's the only way there is money for loans they need.

The main thing is that to get a loan you have to put a certain amount of money in your savings account every month. When you join the Association, you agree on what that amount is. If a lot of people do that, the Association has enough on hand to make small loans to the members. No matter what other expenses we have, Serafina and I always find a way to add to our account.

In this village we have learned to look out for one another. When my work is done I go to my neighbor's. If he finishes first, he comes to help me. If a family has no food, Serafina and the other women take meals to them. We also have a Well Diggers Association. When I have time I work with other men to dig new wells. The wells we have work for a while but then they become dirty. When it floods, the streams bring garbage and human waste into the wells.

Serafina belongs to the Village Women's Group, which has about thirty members. The women weave baskets and make carpets to sell in the market. The women sell their baskets and carpets in the market. Serafina told me that they have to pay a bribe to the police every year in order to keep their permit for a stall.

People from other villages come to this market and buy from our Village Women's Group. With the money they earn, the group helps its members with their needs, like buying cooking pots or paying school fees. If a woman needs to write a letter, the others help her with the spelling and markings. We men sometimes quarrel with each other and get into fights, especially if we have had too much to drink. The women all seem to get along very well. If there is a dispute between two women, the group steps in to settle it. I wish we men could learn how to do that.

Women mainly work in the fields, gather firewood, cook and sew and raise children. Some of the men here mistreat their wives. The women must ask permission even to go out of the house. Whatever money the women make they hand over to their husbands. If women are given chickens by their

parents, they belong to the man. If the chickens lay eggs, they belong to the man. That is the traditional way here.

The man becomes angry if his wife does not bear a son. One of my neighbors once said to me, "A woman who has seven daughters and no sons is no better than one who has had no children at all." I don't like it when men talk that way. Women who are old, who cannot work in the fields, who have never borne children or whose children ignore them, get very little attention from the community. It's as though these conditions were their own fault. I am an old man who grew up in the traditional way but I believe that everyone, man or woman, should be respected.

The situation between men and women goes bad when the men cannot find work. If they have big debts they cannot repay them. And men won't do certain kinds of work that women will do, things like selling reed baskets or working as a servant in a rich person's house. Under these conditions, men feel useless. They can't stand the idea that their wives bring home the money for the family to live on. Some drink or gamble all day long. Some desert their families and run away to the city.

Not every man here is as lucky as I am to have a piece of land to farm. The ones without land work at day jobs whenever they can. I don't know how they manage. Sometimes their wives make more money than they do by taking in laundry, sewing clothes or selling handmade rugs. They blame their husbands for not finding work.

But during times of drought or flooding, there is no work on the farms. The district government hires workers from time to time but you never know when. There are very few jobs in the village. Men often sit around for days with no job to go to. Meantime the family has expenses and the expenses pile up. The man and his wife become very angry toward each other.

Although nobody talks about it, some men beat their wives. Sometimes the men are drunk, sometimes they don't like the dinner their wife has prepared, sometimes their wives have argued with them. For example, the women say that they don't want any more children and complain because

their husbands are not willing to practice birth control. That starts an argument. Usually they fight over money. The wife may accuse her husband of being lazy. Or she may complain that he gambles and drinks too much and comes home too late.

Women do not like to admit they have been beaten. If they have bruises on their faces, they will make up some story about them. The men are especially bad tempered when they cannot have a big meal after working all day in the fields. They complain about how the house looks or how the meal was prepared. If a woman refuses to have sex with her husband, he will beat her. If a woman runs back to her parents after being beaten, they send her back, saying that what goes on in her house is no business of theirs.

The men claim that the beating is justified because they work hard in the fields to provide food and clothes and a house for their wives. At home the wives should do as they say. Yet these same men will beat their wives when they are out of work and the woman has to scrape up the money for them to live on.

I don't know why I am telling you this. It will give you a bad impression of our village. Serafina and I get along very well. She helps me and I help her. That is the modern way. But I draw the line. You will never see me in the kitchen, or sweeping the floor or mending clothes or drawing water at the well. Those are women's jobs. It is not natural for a man to do them. We would laugh at any man who did woman's work.

A man's job is to father children, cultivate the fields, build his house and put bread on the table. We are the heads of our families. But that does not mean that we have any right to treat our women badly.

The women here have started to look out for themselves. They complain about being overworked. They are playing a bigger role in the affairs of the village. When Rafael the headman calls a meeting, some women (including Serafina) show up along with the men. When that happened for the first time about five years ago, several men walked out. The

women argued that they had a right to be there and Rafael gave in.

At one meeting a woman stood up and said: “Do you know what my husband does for a living? He eats and sleeps, then gets up and goes out drinking again.” In past years a woman would never say such things, especially in public. She would be beaten and divorced and sent back to her family. Women used to be afraid of being single but no more. The younger ones don’t think they need husbands to support their children. They say that if their husbands can’t find work, they should help with the cooking and housecleaning. How the times are changing!

From what I have seen, being poor can either break up families or bring them closer together. If the man and woman argue all the time, they might end up in a divorce and break up the family. If they realize that they need each other if they want their children to get enough to eat and stay well, they will try extra hard to get along. In some villages we are seeing more and more families where there is only one parent, almost always a woman.

Does the government help families headed by a woman? According to Serafina, the government does nothing but preach birth control to these women. Of course if the women already have five or six children, the government programs don’t do them much good. What they need is more money to support the children they have.

Slowly we men are coming to accept the voices of women in village affairs. Personally I am in favor of that. The women blame us when things go wrong, for example, when water is scarce because not enough new wells have been dug. So let them take some responsibility. Who knows—maybe some day we will have a head woman!

I am sorry about the coughing. I can’t help myself. It is hard to keep talking like this. Yes, let’s stop once again.

SESSION 4

Yes, I have seen many changes here in the village. A lot of the young people have moved away to the Oczuc and even down to the capital on the coast. I am an old man and I have seen people leaving from here all my life. But in the past ten years it has been happening more and more. The young people say that there is no future here on the High Plain. The work is too hard and there is nothing to do once the work is done.

In Oczuc there are big houses, televisions, computers, cell phones, movie theaters, fancy cars. The young people from our village want those things. They hear even more stories about the money to be made in the capital city on the coast. They want to start businesses and make money. Some of the men have joined the army because the army gives them an education and puts a roof over their heads. They leave us, their parents and grandparents, to make do on our own. In the past we could count on the boys to help in the fields and the girls to do sewing and cooking once they came of age. No more.

The village headman told me a few days ago that young people don't give him the proper respect. The ones who stay here seem angry. When they start drinking, they get into trouble, like stealing llamas or throwing rocks through the windows of the village store. My cousin Eduardo who lives near here told me that maize seeds were stolen right out of the ground not long after he planted them. He chased the boys who did it but they just ran and laughed at him.

I don't like to wash our dirty laundry in front of you but some of the young men go too far. A few months ago a gang of hoodlums broke into the house of a widow in the next village and raped her in front of her two small children. I am fearful that something like that could happen to Serafina while I am in the fields. I would like to have a watchdog but even if I could pay for one I couldn't afford to buy the food for him.

The girls are as bad as the boys. They want to stay out late with their boyfriends. When their parents say something, the girls yell and scream at them. When a girl gets pregnant, she goes to Oczuc to have the baby sucked out of her. That costs money. Last year a boy from our village got into a fight with one from the next village over a girl. The boy from our village was stabbed and he died. Now there is bad blood between our village and the other one.

The district police force hardly ever comes here to make an arrest. To tell the truth I am as afraid of the police as I am of the criminals. They want money in exchange for patrolling the village but even when we pay them they hardly ever show up. It makes you wonder if the police and the criminals are not in it together. There are rumors that some gangs pay off the police. That wouldn't surprise me because the police are always complaining about their low salaries.

We call them the shadow police. A woman reported that her purse had been stolen but that she could identify her attacker. The policeman said he didn't have enough gas for his car to go investigate! In the village marketplace, the police tell the women that they have to have licenses to operate their stalls. The licenses cost money. Either the women pay the policeman or they are forced to close down. Some just move to another spot but before long a policeman shows up again.

Most people don't waste time going to the police. When neighbors get into a fight over who owns an animal or who has rights to a piece of land or other matters, the headman Rafael steps in. He calls together a group of us, maybe four or five villagers, and we listen to both sides. We tell the headman what we think and he makes a decision. The losing neighbor is not always happy but he goes along with the headman's ruling. At least the matter is settled and there is no corruption.

A few nights ago we chased a gang away from my own farm. The problem is that this keeps us away from our work. We wish we could rely on the police but we know better.

As I said we help each other as best we can. But I've seen some change there too. It is harder to get enough men together to put a roof on a neighbor's house. Many of them

have excuses: they have to harvest their crop or they have business in Oczuc or their children are sick. A woman who has given birth could count on other women bringing her firewood. That doesn't happen so much anymore. I don't know if my own daughter will come back to help Serafina after I am gone. I doubt it.

Our saint's days don't last as long as they used to. The processions are shorter. Fewer people come out to take part in them. The only priest we see is one who travels from village to village throughout this district. He gets here about once a month, except during the rainy season when we don't see him at all. The weddings are smaller than they were when I was a young man. Some parents marry their daughters off to whoever settles for the smallest dowry.

It is rare for a family to invite the whole village to their home for a child's baptism or a birthday celebration or a daughter's wedding. Instead they have a small gathering for uncles, aunts and cousins. And even when there is a big celebration, some of the people invited say they can't make it because they are sick or too busy or they make up some other excuse. The truth is that they can't afford to buy a gift. Widows are often not invited to celebrations at all because the family knows from the start that they do not have enough money for a gift.

As I told you the most important group in this village is the burial society. The village headman is in charge of it. When someone dies, he helps the family with the funeral arrangements like organizing the procession and the church service. He gives the family some money for expenses, depending on what they have contributed to the society. You call it insurance? I guess so.

After all, nobody will put you in the ground free of charge. The burial society does not pay for everything, far from it. The death certificate costs money. Some people can't afford a coffin so they just wrap the dead person in a carpet. The workers who dig the grave have to be paid. The big meal for the village is important, so people give up buying food and clothes for themselves in order to pay for it.

Why put on a big meal if no one can afford it? You people don't understand our way of life. If a family did not follow this custom, it would be ignored and cut out of other village activities. You see, the family honors the dead person by putting on a big meal. Mourners cry with the family; that way the entire village shows its respect for the dead person. Villagers give money and food to the family, though it is not enough to cover the costs. Our funeral customs keep the community together. But we pay a price. In our family Serafina's father died right at the time we lost our first child. Those two funerals wiped out our savings.

I'm getting very tired. I've tried to answer your questions but right now I don't feel very well. I need to rest. All right, just a couple of more questions.

What do I wish for? Enough food for me, Serafina and the grandchildren. Good drinking water that we don't have to boil. Not feeling tired all the time. A bed so that we don't have to sleep on the floor. Better clothes to wear besides this old poncho. A pair of shoes instead of these rubber sandals. You can see that they are made out of old truck tires.

What else? A bigger house without holes in the roof. Just enough rain for our crops. More llamas. A bigger piece of land. Being able to sell my potatoes and make good money. A truck of my own with money for oil and gas and parts. No debt. A better relationship with our son and daughter. Being able to walk around at night without being robbed. Mostly I would like to be able to put my mind at ease.

I wish I could provide nice things for Serafina—things a woman wants like oil for her hair or soap for washing. These days I worry about how Serafina will get along after I am gone. In the past parents could always count on their children to take care of them when they grew old. No more.

Our daughter in Oczuc would never allow Serafina to move in with them. She says there is barely enough room in their small apartment for her, her husband and their three children. Maybe it's just as well. Serafina would be right in the middle of all the fighting that goes on between our daughter and son-in-law.

The rich have time to rest, to watch television, to visit their friends, to go to shows, to travel to the coast or even to other countries. I have never been on an airplane. I can understand why the young people move away from here. If I was a young man I would probably do the same. The rich look down on us. If a poor man is beaten up by a rich man and the poor man files a complaint, the police don't even bother to write it down. The police are just another stick the rich use to beat the poor.

Who do I trust? You people certainly ask a lot of questions. All right, I know you need the answers for your report. But after this I must stop. Let's see: who do I trust?

I trust Rafael, our headman. He is one of us and he helps us solve our problems. I have known him since he was a child. Serafina and I don't always agree with everything he does but he tries to be fair. At the village council meetings he gives everyone a chance to speak. Some people complain that he favors his family over the rest of the community. For example he made sure that the well we dug last month was located near his brother's farm. That's all right. We understand these things. Anyone else in his place would do the same thing.

As our village headman Rafael is part of the district council of headmen. They meet with Miguel to tell him what we need. From what I hear he does what he can for our village at those meetings. That's why we were able to get some money from the district for our irrigation system.

I also trust the burial society. If I tell them what I want for my funeral, they listen. They show us respect.

The church is a big part of our lives here. We don't see a priest very often but he will come for baptisms and weddings and funerals. I have already told you about the sisters—wonderful people. My problem with the church is that we have very little to say about how it operates. The priest always asks people to give what money they can to help the church but they don't give us any say in how the money will be spent.

There are stories of priests in Peñuria who live very well on the money of poor people. They live in big houses and

drive big cars. They even have wives and children, even though the Catholic Church says they are not supposed to marry. I haven't seen any of that here but a lot of people believe those stories.

Outside groups sometimes come to our village to help the community. I have mentioned a couple of them, the American college students, the Village Credit Association, the government's Rural Development Program.

In my years other groups have come to help us here but I have a hard time remembering their names. They leave behind their pieces of paper. You can see them piled up on the table. Let's see—one was called Oxfam, another was Catholic Relief Services, there was World Vision and another called Save the Children. I can't keep them all straight. I wonder if they ever talk to one another. They all want to do the same thing.

They dig wells, or teach school, or tell the women about birth control, or try to start a money lending service, or give us farmers advice on how to plant our fields, or help build a new house for someone. They come and they go and life here goes on the way it always has. We are always polite but we do not expect much from these groups. They mean well, I am sure. Everything is fine while they are here but when they leave things go back to the way they were.

These groups should tell us who they are and why they have come here. When they first show up the villagers think they are politicians. Or informers. Or undercover police. It takes time for people here to trust outsiders. If they help some families and not others, people think they are playing favorites. I wonder if they ever ask themselves if anything changed because of their being here. They might be surprised.

One group, I forget its name, came here and built a grinding mill for our maize. We had never asked for it but they decided it was something we needed. They said we could make more money by grinding more of the maize for sale. And it would be easier to store it. They were sure it would make a big difference in our lives and maybe they were right. I just wish they had talked to us before they started. We could have told them a few things about the weather here and how

it affects machines and why we need training in case the mill needed repair.

But they were in a hurry. The job took them a few months and then they left. The mill operated with a diesel engine. It was hard to get the fuel for the engine but the village managed for a while. Then the mill broke down and we have not been able to fix it. You can see it sitting there down near the lake. The women have gone back to crushing the grain with smooth stones.

It's the same with you people. When I finish telling you about my life, you will go away and we will never see each other again. I suppose you will travel to another village and get another old man or woman there to tell you about their lives. No, don't get upset. I am not angry. In fact I am too tired to feel much of anything. If what I am telling you helps with your report, that is fine. And maybe as you say someone who reads it will decide to do something about the poverty in this village. But you will forgive me if I say that I do not believe that.

I think that what the villagers want from people who come here is for them to have good manners, to listen to us (the way you are doing), to tell us honestly what they can and can't do to solve our problems—our need for food, water, money, jobs, education, medical care, whatever—and to treat everyone equally instead of playing favorites. We may be poor but we are not blind. Even though we complain about the groups that come here, we wish they would stay.

Let me give you an example. If I go to the clinic and tell the nurse what is wrong and she listens carefully and gives me the medicine I need to get better, I will tell my neighbors what a good clinic that is. If she ignores me for a long time, and then calls me to her office rudely, and seems to know how to treat my problem before I even tell her about it and charges me a lot of money for a small amount of medicine that doesn't do much good anyway, I warn my neighbors to stay away. But of course they might not have much choice.

On the radio I hear that Peñuria is a democracy and that the president of the country is going to give more power to the provincial districts. If this country is a democracy, it is a

democracy of the rich. They are the ones who can get assistance at the district offices or the police station or in the courts. They can get loans at the bank and receive fast treatment at the clinic.

At the district office, people half our age treat me and Serafina like dogs. It is hard to find out who is supposed to deal with our problem. If you finally get to the right person, he will say: "Sorry, but I cannot help you." The government makes too many promises and never fulfills them.

In farming you need credit, otherwise you do not have the money to buy seeds for planting. I have tried many times to get a loan from the bank. I have not been successful very often and then only when I agree to turn over my land to the bank if I do not repay the money on time. The interest rate is very high and there is a lot of tiny writing that even Serafina cannot make any sense of. Even then it takes a bribe to get the papers signed. Thank God I have been able to repay the loans I did get before the bank took over the farm.

Next time I am going to try for a loan at the Village Credit Association office instead of the bank. When Serafina had difficulty paying back the loan she got from them, they gave her extra time. And the interest rate was low. The loans they make are very small but I may be able to get by with less credit this year if I am careful with my seed purchases.

In our village we have a few shops, a post office, a bank and even a restaurant. I'm sure you have seen them. We are quite proud of the restaurant. It's new. We cannot afford the prices there but when tourists come to the village they always look for a place to eat. Serafina went to the restaurant a couple of years ago to see if she could get a job as a waitress. But when the boss started calling her "grandmother", she knew she had no chance.

There is a pawnshop where we go when we need cash. There are rumors that developers from the coast plan to build a hotel here. That would bring more tourists. But rumors come and rumors go, so we will have to wait and see.

One problem with being so poor is that we do not know what is going on. This radio is my main contact with the world beyond the High Plain. The reception is good since we

are so high but if I forget to buy batteries we can get out of touch when they run down. And the radio does not tell us all we need to know.

When the extension agent from Oczuc held a meeting at the district school last month about a new irrigation project, we never heard about it. The people who went will get new irrigation equipment before we do, if we ever do. That kind of thing happens all the time. Sometimes we miss out on the government's food distribution programs when the harvest is bad because we have no way of finding out about it.

I wish I had a cell phone. That way, even if we did not get a notice from the government about a meeting, one of our neighbors could call us.

Rafael the district headman has been talking to the village council about helping our people buy cell phones. The phones are relatively cheap, though you do have to pay a fee for the service. I have seen a couple of them in the village. The Village Credit Association says it will make loans to people who want to buy a cell phone; they promise to teach people how to use it. I cannot read or write but I can figure out numbers when I see them written down.

I heard something the other day that amazed me. Helena the widow I told you about who has a son in America got a cell phone. Her son pays for her service by using the Internet to put money in her account. Lately he has started to put more money in the account than the cell phone company needs. When she goes to Oczuc she stops at the cell phone office and withdraws the extra money. The cell phone company acts like a bank! How it all works is beyond me. I am an ignorant man. But even I can see that to live in this modern world you need a cell phone, no matter how poor you are.

That money is what keeps Helena alive. When her husband died, his relatives came and claimed his farm as their own. She had to be content with a small patch of land. I don't know how she and her son survived. He is a good son who kept his promise to send money to his mother after he got settled in America. She is one of the lucky ones. Many widows live alone, barely scraping by. They have no friends

and rarely leave their houses. In the cold times they cover themselves with llama skins and stay in bed all day. If you are alone, you may as well be dead.

I wish Serafina and I had more money. But what matters most is that she and I get along. I worry more about her than I do about myself. And even though I curse my son for abandoning his family, I have become fond of the grandchildren. They are like a second chance. I won't make the mistakes with them that I made with my own children. My parents are gone and so are my brothers. But I have nephews and nieces and a few cousins that we see from time to time. Serafina's mother is still living. Imagine—she must be seventy years old! She has never liked me but we still talk to each other.

I have friends in this village, other farmers like myself. Once in a while, for example, during a holiday, we have a chance to sit down for a cup of tea in the village marketplace and talk. Those are the best times. We lend seed and fertilizer to each other, repair each other's fences, help each other with planting and harvesting, bring food to a friend's sick children. I tell you, it is better to have ten friends than ten thousand soles.

The Village Credit Association recently called a meeting of the farmers and gave us an idea. All the farmers could bring our potatoes to the village marketplace, load them on to a truck and drive them to Oczuc where they could be sold. We could then split up the money we made. Each farmer would get money based on how many potatoes he contributed.

That way we would not need to go through those traders from Oczuc. They might not be happy but we have a right to sell what we grow ourselves. Instead of each farmer buying his own truck, we would buy only one truck that would be shared.

The man from the village Credit Association called this idea a farmers cooperative. He said he could help us draw up what he called a business plan. And the Association could lend us the money to buy the truck.

That sounds like a complicated plan to me but I am willing to give it a try. It would be quite a change from what we are used to. We farmers in the High Plain have always worked our own fields and sold our crops alone. Since I cannot read and write I would have to depend on Serafina to make sure we brought our share of the potatoes and got the money we were owed for them.

I worry that someone who transported our potatoes and sold them in Oczuc could cheat us by pocketing a lot of the money himself. We would have no way of knowing what he really sold them for. As Serafina said, we would have to make sure that anyone who was acting for us was honest. I have my doubts about this whole idea but I also know the times have changed. We need a more modern way of farming. Maybe with the help of the man from the Village Credit Association we could make the plan work.

And one thing is for sure. If we don't help ourselves, no one else will. I may not live to see how this cooperative idea works out but maybe it will so that our grandchildren will have a future if they decide to stay here in the High Plain. So I am going to support the plan at our next meeting. If I make it.

I have been feeling more and more tired lately. After working in the fields all day I only want to come home and fall asleep. It's hard even to sit down with the family for a meal. Serafina says that sometimes my words sound confused. Some days I feel a kind of numbness on one side of my body. But later the feeling goes away and I can manage to go out to the fields.

We have always been poor, for hundreds of years at least. But we have survived. Why do we stay here? This is the life we know. There is more to us than our poverty. Everyone in this village knows everyone else. We all have relatives in the other villages of the district. We know that we must depend on each other to live. We help each other in the fields and at home, when food is scarce or children are sick or when the floods destroy our houses. We come together for baptisms, birthdays, weddings, funerals, and holy days. We have our songs, our dances, our processions.

It is true that some of the old ways are dying off, but we older people hold on to them as best we can. I don't know if enough young people will stay in the High Plain to pass on our ways but I hope so. Many of them want a better life in the cities, but from what I hear life there has its own problems. The young people who move down to the coast may have a car and a computer and a nice home but they have very few friends. Perhaps that is why my son and young people like him have turned to drugs. The lights of the streets, cars and buildings block out the stars at night.

I cannot imagine living that way. Up here where the air is thin we see thousands of stars. They seem so close at times that you almost think you can reach out and touch them. We look to the stars to tell us about the weather, especially one group of eleven stars—a college student from America called it Pleiades or something like that. If it is very bright just before dawn, we expect early rains and a big potato crop. If it is not bright, we wait a while longer before planting because we know there will not be a lot of rainfall.

But that is not all the stars do for us. We may have become Christians once the missionaries arrived but we also hold on to the beliefs and customs of our ancestors. They taught us to respect nature. The earth is our mother and brings forth life. The sun and the moon watch over us and protect us. The stars show us the power of the one spirit that binds us all together. We call him Viracocha and his creation is vast. He ordered the sun and the moon and the stars to come forth and shine light on the earth. He controls the unfolding of time.

Maybe he is the Christian God or some other being. We do not know. We worship him all the same. Why take chances? He made men and women out of the stones in the High Plain. He preserves the stars and for all we know there is life in them too.

According to what I have heard on the radio, America is planning to send space ships with people in them to Mars. I don't know how they can do such a thing but I believe it is possible because they have been sending space ships to Mars for a while now. These space ships have not had people on

them but that will come in a matter of time. I will not be alive when that happens but Serafina may be.

When I was very young the Americans sent men to the moon on space ships several times. I imagine that since then they have learned how to build bigger rockets that can carry people all the way to Mars. The Americans are trying to stay ahead of other countries because people in Europe and China and Japan are also sending up rockets. One report I heard on the radio said that some companies in America are even planning to build hotels in space and will try to attract tourists!

You see, we know about these things. They are amazing, especially for our people who must seem very backward. And yet when I look at the stars I think that the universe holds more secrets than any space ship can discover. At night when I stand in a field and look at the stars I sometimes feel overcome by the sense of being at one with the spirit of the universe. I do not know how to explain that to you but it is a feeling I would never have if I was living on the coast.

Life in Peñuria is changing though change comes slowly to the High Plain. On the coast they are building factories and office buildings and huge apartments. I have seen pictures of them on the television set at the grandchildren's school. New gold and copper mines have been discovered in other districts here in the High Plain. Foreign investors are spending more on exploring for oil and gas.

I'm sure you know all these things. I talk about them only to show you that even though we here in this village remain poor and hold on to our traditional ways we know what is going on in other places in Peñuria and even in the rest of the world. We would like to live better than we do, especially since we see that so many people in other places are better off than we are but we do not want to give up our traditions. At least we old people do not.

But our time is short and the young people have different ideas. Most of the young people just want to settle down with a good job and raise a family. If they find they cannot do that here, they move to Oczuc or down to the coast or even to another country. Others are angry with the way the country is

being run and they join organizations that are out to change things. There is nothing wrong with that, except for those organizations that plant bombs in the middle of cities or shoot at government officials. That is going too far. I too blame the government for keeping us poor but terrorizing innocent people is not the way to make changes.

I have been talking for a long time and I am tired. I hope you will forgive me if I lie down. I am dizzy, the room seems to be spinning around me. Do you see the llama skin by the other wall? Will you bring it to me. I feel very cold all of a sudden.

Will you look outside and see if Serafina is coming? Surely you can do that much for an old man. When you came this morning I was feeling strong enough to talk to you. But as the day has gone on I started feeling weaker. It has been like that for the last couple of weeks but each day it has gotten worse.

Excuse me, I can't stop this shivering. It's getting dark. You say someone far off seems to be walking this way—a woman with a large water jar. Is she standing straight up, not bent over? Yes? That is Serafina. It will take her a while to get here. Would one of you step out and call to her? Tell her to hurry.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The inspiration and much of the source material for this work came from *Voices of the Poor*, a remarkable three volume work produced by the World Bank and published for it by Oxford University Press (1999, 2000, 2002). Those volumes gather the voices of some sixty thousand poor men and women in sixty countries. Angel cannot speak for all of them, but maybe a few at least.

Robert F. Clark
Alexandria, Virginia
January 2010