than the past."

The legacy of that brutal war underlay every encounter during my weeklong stay. It cropped up in my conversations with Carolina Baiza, the environmental projects manager of Árbol de Fuego, the wonderful ecohotel where I stayed in San Salvador. Almost everyone in her hometown, located in the worst of the war zones, had fled or gone into hiding during the war, she told me.

"My grandmother was one of the few people who kept their businesses open," Carolina said with a rueful shake of her head. "She had a general store, and she was a master of discretion. One week she would sell to the leftists; the next week she would sell to the partisans of the right. Her business was booming! But even for her, those years were awful."

I met a taxi driver who had lost a brother, a shopkeeper who had lost a son, a waitress whose brothers had fled abroad. On a visit to Suchitoto, a colonial town of about 25,000 people, an hour's drive north of the capital, it all became real to me in a new and personal way. A one-room exhibition in the Centro Arte para la Paz showed an enlarged photograph of a dozen teenage boys standing in a semicircle and grinning widely. Immediately I thought of my son's high school soccer team, who had struck just such a pose, all excitement and hope, before a championship game—except instead of soccer balls, these boys were holding automatic rifles.

And yet, despite the heartbreak and horror of that period—which ended with the signing of a peace treaty in 1992—brilliant smiles greeted me virtually everywhere I went. From hotel clerks and office workers to backcountry cooks and wizened weavers to the everyday entrepreneurs who walked the streets selling fresh-plucked papayas in woven baskets and handfuls of cashews in neatly tied bags, everyone I met exuded resiliency, determination, and hospitality. In every interaction, there was visible pride in El Salvador today and a resolve to show the country in its best light.

Embodying this effort, Claudia—who seemed to know every person of importance ("I'm so sorry the minister of tourism is away," she said at one point, "I would have loved for you to meet him.")—had arranged for me to meet with Fernando Llort, an artist revered throughout the land for his simple, buoyant paintings of rural scenes and for the gift of art and hope he has given to his fellow Salvadorans. On my third morning, we met in the living room of Fernando's humble one-story home in San Salvador. It was just around the corner from his two-room museum, where I had immediately fallen in love with his primary-color, Picasso-esque renditions of animals, birds, flowers, women balancing baskets on their heads, and white adobe houses with terra-cotta tiled roofs. "I get my images from the Savior," Fernando said, "and I think I am his instrument to bring hope and joy, inspiration and healing to the people."

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As part of this healing, Fernando created a series of workshops to teach the residents of his wife's hometown, La Palma, how to paint in his vivid, childlike style, and also how to create intricate colored carvings in wood and on seeds of a legume called *copinol*. Those same workshops now employ hundreds of artisans who turn out folk-art bowls, plates, tiles, and, yes, refrigerator magnets. From the craftspeople who make the art to the shopkeepers who sell it and the restaurateurs and hoteliers who serve the tourists who come to see it, Fernando has sparked an entire town's economic revitalization.

That's one tile in the mosaic of modern El Salvador. I discovered another that evening in Suchitoto, when I joined the weekly Friday procession of the Stations of the Cross. Some 350 townspeople, ranging in age from elementary school kids to bent-over elders, gathered in the cobbled streets of the town center.

A half-dozen boys in medieval cassocks, one swinging a smoking censer, others holding flaming torches, led the procession. Four sturdy young men carried a wooden figure of Christ bearing the cross. Drawings depicting the stations were hung on different street corners, and the faithful shuffled slowly from one illustration to the next, chanting as they walked. When they reached each station, they stopped, and a nun or priest read the relevant verses from scripture. Then all intoned the Lord's Prayer.

As we walked in the torchlight through the darkened streets, I felt like I was moving back through centuries—until I noticed some bored teenagers surreptitiously checking their cell phones. Still, the sweep and resonance of the past carried us into the cathedral, where the ceremony swashed into an incantatory sea of prayer.

After the procession, I stopped for a Pilsener beer at the only bar still open on the town square and joined three U.S. visitors, who were volunteering locally, and one of their Salvadoran friends. The volunteers' idealism was inspiring, but what stayed with me was the very end of our conversation, when I asked the Salvadoran what his dreams were for his life. After a pause, he spoke haltingly: "I want to have a wife. I want to have a family. I want to give my children an education. I want to have a stable income. I want to have a home." He stopped. That was all. Suddenly the night was suffused with gratitude and hope and despair and pain and wonder. Five bottles clinked; five voices rose in a single cheer: "El Salvador!"

As I walked through the silent streets to my hotel, the Salvadoran man's aspirations mingling in my mind with the timeless prayers of the torchlit parade, I remembered the night before in San Salvador, when Carolina had taken me for a 10-minute walk to her favorite *pupusería*. As we approached the neighborhood square, we came upon a group of mostly 20- and 30-year-olds in shorts, T-shirts, and running shoes, stretching and jogging in place.

We watched, amazed, as more and more people, old and young, all dressed to run, joined the crowd. Carolina asked a passerby what was going on. "Ah!" she said when she heard the response. "Of course! A couple of nights a week, people gather in the square and run together through the town. The police accompany them to make sure one lane of traffic is open for them to run."

She paused for a second and then turned to me. "I love this!" she said, and her face glowed with a moon-bright light. "During the war years, people couldn't even go out at night. Now, look at this! This is the new El Salvador." A

Writer DON GEORGE is profiled on page 22.

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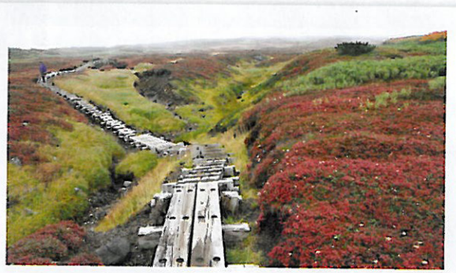

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FALL FOLIAGE IN HOKKAIDO, JAPAN
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Fall foliage is a well-known treat in New England, but Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido boasts some of the most breathtaking colors on the planet. Book yourself at an onsen hot springs resort or ryokan Japanese inn and spend your days tree-gazing at Daisetsuzan National Park.

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