

Mariana Soto

A Journey to the Truth (Originally Conducted in Spanish)

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Interviewee: Mr. Luis Diego Soto (LDS)

A crisis of meaning can be caused by many possible events: the loss of a loved one, the abuse of drugs, leaving a familiar place, etc. The cause for the crisis of meaning discussed below, however, occurred somewhat differently. This crisis in particular happened to an entire family, yet it is focused on the case of one family member, Mr. Luis Diego Soto. Mr. Soto's family was a typical, Catholic Costa Rican family during the 1960s-'70s. However, when Mr. Soto, the oldest son of five siblings, was about seventeen years old his family was introduced to a different set of beliefs led by a man who promised a path of truth and illumination. Mr. Soto's mother, going through a difficult divorce, had sought advice and guidance in a spiritual leader named Fernando Barquero, in hopes that he would help her family through this situation. Mr. Soto led this path in search of the Truth for almost fourteen years, until one day he began to question this man's knowledge and teachings, which led him to leave his family and home in search of the understanding of truth.

MS- Mr. Soto, thank you for letting me interview you for this project, and for being willing to share your story. Before the crisis of meaning, did you have any particular questions about truth and the meaning of life, or about religion and the spirituality that you were interested in learning more about? Did you feel unsatisfied with the understanding you had of such concepts up to that moment? How did the search for a new meaning begin?

LDS- When I was sixteen years old, the beliefs I held up was Roman Catholic. I went to mass regularly and believed in all of its elements, but when the time came that I began to question certain things, this belief system suddenly became too small, too limited. I began asking questions that had no answer within the Catholic frame of thought.

At that time I met a person named Fernando Barquero, who was knowledgeable about other systems of beliefs far broader, and far more interesting. He knew the mind was unlimited, that it held enormous potential, and that the belief systems could be questioned.

I was very interested in this topic, so I began to take his classes about positive thinking, about Hinduism, and about oriental philosophies that introduced me to a new panorama. They allowed me to develop enquiries that would, gradually and eventually, destroy my belief system. It happened gradually because this man also came from a Catholic belief, but he claimed that it was insufficient and that the Catholic Church had, in a way, betrayed its beginnings. Based on this, Barquero proclaimed a belief in Jesus, who was the Son of God, but attached this idea to a secret organization called the Essenes. He stated that Jesus had been an illuminated mind from this same organization, and that the Catholic religion had taken him as a figure and made him theirs to create a new religion (Catholicism). So I read and studied a book called *Jesús y los Esenios (Jesus and the Essenes)* that stated that Jesus had been instructed by a group of teachers and mentors. Allegedly, these mentors even believed in the concept of reincarnation – which is the migration of a soul from one body to another throughout the ages with the

purpose of gradually attaining knowledge and wisdom until it can be liberated from the human experience. Thus my focus changed completely, and for the next twelve years I absolutely believed and dedicated myself to his teachings, which were influenced by oriental aspects and a more universal Christianity than the one I had known until then.

MS- Could you describe the transition from an ordinary life to living in search of the Truth under the guidance of this spiritual leader? How did things change for you and your close acquaintances? What did this new path mean for you and your family?

LDS- During the first two years of having this new belief system my family structure stayed the same, but I did change my attitude in different situations. In high school, for instance, I stopped being attracted to things that would normally interest teenagers. I quit playing chess (which was important because I was the Costa Rican National Youth Champion at the time) and I dedicated myself entirely to searching for truth and finding out how the human mind worked. My personal attitude changed; I became more reserved, a seeker, and an avid reader. At the time my family's interest in this belief also intensified (with the exception of my father's). It all resulted in the separation of my parents when I was seventeen, so my siblings and I went to live with my mother. I became somewhat the family leader at this point as we tried to find out ways to earn money on our own, in an attempt to be economically independent from my father.

MS- How did Barquero's new guidance and teachings affect your own personal identity and your understanding of the world?

LDS- After I turned eighteen, my reaction towards the establishment was so strong and violent, that I did not want to go to University. It seemed to me that they only turned you into a robot, that they taught you about what is already known, and I wanted to explore the unknown. Part of this idea implied a constant exercise of introspection, a constant examination of the ego and how it worked. It consisted of fighting the ego in order to destroy it and leading an "objective life", focused on needs rather than likes and preferences. In this fight to triumph over the most personal aspects of one's personality – the likes, the preferences – I systematically tried to eliminate them, searching for an "objective life" with a perfect function. This guru gained more and more leverage and control over me, and was able to manipulate me emotionally, affecting my decision-making and even my way of thinking. This was possible because of my need for an internal search for meaning and my admiration for him as the one who possessed the truth.

MS- Could you please explain what it was like living under this man's guidance, what teachings he professed, and how he would teach you and your family about the quest for meaning, truth and illumination? How exactly would you define these concepts?

LDS- It was an interesting experience that promoted the arts, the culture, the operas, the classical music, etc. It was an effort to refine the senses looking for the development of the human being's greatest capacities. It promoted very arduous and intense labor, and doing things by oneself. One of the maxims was to do things the best you could, always. It was a compulsive and even sickly quest for excellence, to the point that if you were

washing the dishes and a mug fell to the floor and made a noise, it was permitted for them to strongly hit your hand to make sure that it would not happen again. Posture had to be straight, language had to be correct, it was a search for absolute rightness in everything. It was a strict, tough life, very Spartan, where there was no space for pleasure. Like a Spartan, you had to be a strong warrior, willing to work by force of will only. In this same frame of thought, authority and hierarchy was needed. You were a soldier, and you had to learn to obey. This [devotion] came from the admiration I felt, not fear. I felt extreme respect for Barquero because he was an enlightened person, connected to the power, almost like a god reincarnated. At first, about fifteen people followed his teachings, myself included, but eventually only eight of us were left.

What was really impressive was that he possessed photographic memory, so he was able to read very special books and later deliver what they said as if they were his own words. It was a great lie and manipulation on his part: he would read books such as the *Tao Te Ching* written by Lao Tzu—a very beautiful book written more than three thousand years ago—a few Apocryphal Gospels, and he would repeat them to us as if they were part of his own wisdom, his own making. This would create in me a great admiration for him and an idea that he was godlike because he was connected to the source. It also led to a great emotional submission so I was easily manipulated.

This is a very interesting element that I want to point out, and a very dangerous one of those who control others. In claiming that they hold a superior spiritual truth than the rest of the people they become dominators and manipulators of others, and this happens in almost all religions. When people have knowledge and use it as a means of manipulation and power over others with less knowledge, they are creating a position of authority that has selfish purposes. In the end, time showed that this leader had had control over a lot of money and the things we had done as a group; he was drunk with the power he held over others, myself included, and he enjoyed controlling other people.

The positive side to this was that I was learning a lot throughout the whole process. The problem is that when the messenger proclaims himself superior, you often tend to confuse the message with the messenger. With time I was able to learn that the messenger was false, but that many aspects of the message were right and good. Later on came that meticulous process of separating the truth from the lies, the right from the manipulated, eventually recovering the information and making it a positive experience instead of a negative one. This, of course, demanded a lot of effort.

My understanding of the truth and enlightenment was very different before I realized that Barquero was lying. I believed in an absolute state of knowledge. I believed that you could access a spiritual, mental state of pure understanding, of unity with God and therefore, a total comprehension of a supposedly superior, universal truth. Acting based on virtue and on absolute rectitude meant believing that there existed an absolute, accessible truth. Illumination (enlightenment) therefore was being in direct contact with the spiritual source beyond any name or religion, having an intuitive contact that was absolute and profound. It implied knowing how to do what had to be done at the right time, and to do the right thing always. That's what it meant to live in what we called the Kingdom of Truth, and the Domain of Virtue.

MS- How did you come to realize that Barquero's teachings were limited, unsatisfactory, or even wrong in your perspective? What were the shifting elements that helped you realize his vision was limited?

LDS- First, the fact that eight years had gone by and no illumination had arrived in spite of having followed everything he prescribed. I asked myself, "What is missing? What am I doing incorrectly?" I also felt a disconnected from my most humane part. I had cut off all my likings, my preferences, and it made me a very stiff, tough person on the inside, cerebral and very unemotional. It had turned me into a miserable, unhappy person who lived with pain, but was unaware of it. I became conscious of it through a book *The First and Last Freedom*, by Jiddu Krishnamurti. I was twenty-six years old when I started reading it. He had been a spiritual leader, and he stated that truth is a pathless land, and that he who said there was a path to get there was lying. He stated that truth could not be accessed through others, but through yourself only, through self-discovery. The ego could not be destroyed because when you attempt to do so, you only make it stronger because you turn it into something different. It was the ego attempting to destroy the ego, denying itself but affirming itself at the same time because it is the ego that seeks to destroy itself. It is a very interesting and profound topic. This led me to understand that what I was doing had no future, that I had reached a limit. Mentally, I would not be able to arrive where I wanted to because I needed my feelings. I needed a reconnection with my humanity, with my physical body, and with my mind to attain greater depth of thought and greater clarity. I began to see evidence that the leader was lying. I went one day to the Lehman bookstore and found Lao Tzu's book *Tao Te Ching*, the same writings that I had copied by hand, years before. This opened my eyes and I realized that obviously there was something wrong, so I began to question and to doubt this leader's legitimacy.

MS- What were you able to find in these books at that moment? What had stopped you from fully understanding them, and how was it different the second time around?

LDS- Because of the anguish, the pain I experienced, and the unresolved conflict, I decided that I was done with it, and so I went to *La Libreria Internacional* (The International Bookstore, from Costa Rica). I wanted a book in English to practice the language because I had not spoken it in a long time, so I bought *The First and Last Freedom*, I took the pick up truck, and I went to the beach for three days to read, to take some time for myself and to disappear for a while. This came from the anguish and the pain of not finding an answer, of wanting to expand my horizons. The guru had prohibited reading saying that it was unnecessary and a waste of time, but by this time I already allowed myself to question certain things. The book mentioned many topics: love, fear, death, authority, ideological beliefs, etc. It was a very clarifying book. But it was that same anguish and pain that led me to search for it, as well as the desire to practice my English, something as simple as that. Before I would only read the books that he recommended.

MS- Tell me about your decision to leave the group to go "out there" and discover the truth by yourself. Was this particularly difficult--your experience "in the real world" and your relationships outside of this family circle at the time?

LDS- I was in this scheme from the time I was seventeen until the age of twenty-nine. The great advantage was that besides this spiritual, secret life that I led, I managed a small company that I had developed with the help of my family. We started selling *cajeta* (a sweet caramel-flavored spread) and *trigueñas* (a mixture of rice krispies and honey) but later on switched to producing nougat. I was in charge of the finances of the group, and this exposed me to the world of commerce and business. I developed the ability to work hard and make good business, which opened up a path that helped me question what I had done and to say, "I need to change direction." I became a successful businessman and made good profits, which was an opportunity.

I began to change certain things inside the organization. I started contradicting and standing up for myself, and the guru realized this and eventually told me to leave. I was opposed to, for example, the fact that we would all work without any pay. I decided I wouldn't work like this, and began charging a salary for a year, since I was in charge of the funds. This generated many conflicts when those in the community discovered it. I also took a day off each week for myself, to rest from work, and for my own leisure time. After a year of conflicts because of these and other differences, they asked me to leave.

MS- What was this new search for meaning like, now that you were on your own? How old were you when you finally left the group? Could you describe what life seemed like now that you were "free"?

LDS- I decided to leave from the group in a final rupture, and choose to go to Europe for three months with the money I had saved. I wanted to discover the world, the real feelings of people, to be exposed to other ways of thinking. When I left, I did so with apprehension, doubt, expectation, interest, and curiosity.

I was very impressed with the art in Florence, Italy. All the statues and paintings held so much beauty. It was interesting to see and to meet people, and to discover that they were very different from how I had categorized them. It was a way to rediscover the world without the prejudices I had made before, without censorship.

MS- Was there a process of forgiveness that you went through, forgiveness towards your family, towards Barquero?

LDS- I never felt resentment or rancor towards the man. I thought that things happen for a reason, I can look at the bright side, recover the good of the experience and move on. What was really important to me was reconnecting with my own ideas, my feelings. It took some more years, because since I had toughened up on the inside I was used to act only upon my will, like a Spartan. Many things that others do, and feel, and enjoy, did not have the same effect on me. Little by little, things began to change. The birth of my children helped: to see them play with toys on the floor, to see their tenderness, helped me reconnect internally.

At the same time I was taking and eventually teaching a course in *Attitudinal Healing*, which aimed at helping people heal their past and unite with their inner power. This is the true empowerment. Eventually I learned that this was the best way to conquer the ego. Ego is a force that is externally implanted if you are detached from your internal, intrinsic self. When you act from your deepest self, the ego loses its

power, because you are in a position of transparency, not in an external imposition. Even though I imposed this on myself, it was still externally imposed; it was a set of prejudices that I created. When you are able to dissolve this, you become less rigid, softer, and more unified.

MS- Why is it necessary to destroy, or to conquer the ego?

LDS- The ego is the enemy of people. It is an artificial mental construction that makes people live their lives based on external beliefs and constraints. When you live like this, you are disconnected from your internal self, and you develop collateral defects such as ambition, egoism, and arrogance that prevent you from being happy. Those with the smallest or most transparent egos are the happiest. Ego consumes energy, it makes you on the lookout for what others will say about you, but it changes from person to person. Ego is the image you have of yourself, formed by all the constraints, biases, and experiences that have molded you as you've grown. When you own your experiences, when you've processed them, then you act freely. If you haven't processed them, you are enslaved, and that leads to unhappiness. This is why it is necessary to not be a prisoner of your ego.

MS- Why do you mention that the ego is an artificial aspect if it seems so natural?

LDS- It's normal for everyone to develop an ego during the early years of life because it is the image, the structure you use to face life. Through this image you relate to your interior self and the external world. This is necessary and healthy to have an ego that is sure of itself; a good personality, confidence, and a proactive attitude. The problem occurs when that personality grows bigger, taking over your behavior, reactions, and responses. In my experience it becomes artificial, like a coin without value. Some politicians develop an ego, some don't. That doesn't have anything to do with what you do in life, but in certain professions you are more likely to have it.

MS- Is it possible to absolutely eliminate the ego?

LDS- No. When I was in Barquero's group I thought it to be possible, but not anymore. If you are constantly scrutinizing yourself you can dominate and control it, but sooner or later your self-image and your conditioning will make a move based solely on a selfish interest. Living your life without any bias, any influences, is impossible. We are conditioned beings whether we like it or not.

MS- How did you find *Attitudinal Healing*? How was this group different from the Barquero's organization that you were a part of before?

LDS- The structure of the leadership itself was different. Its goal was to empower the people themselves to be leaders. When a leader does not attempt to manipulate you, nor does he tell you, "I am the authority, follow me," but instead shares the ideas and invites you to verify them yourself, the whole approach is different. If I tell you to do something because I say so you either resist it or you do exactly what I tell you. If I say, instead, try this idea, apply it to your own life, you will realize it works on your own. This is what

happened to me in a two-day seminar led by Dennis Robillard. Although he had an important message to share, he didn't dazzle me. I have great respect for him, yet I am able to see his shortcomings. Yet in this area in particular he had knowledge that helped me a great deal at that particular time.

I found *Attitudinal Healing* through another organization called *Unity*, which focused on freedom and self-empowerment. Its objective was to incorporate and unite those who went there. One of its ideas was, "That which we cannot incorporate, seizes us." By incorporate I mean to make yours, to comprehend. "I can't stand it!" Well, why can't you stand it? Maybe the problem is inside you, and not in that which you think you cannot stand.

MS- How many years later did you find *Unity*?

LDS- I found *Unity* two years later, and *Attitudinal Healing* five years later. The process of attaining personal freedom and breaking free from all that conditioning took place from the moment I left [Barquero's] organization. I started it by myself, separating the real from the lie. I saw a psychologist to be able to understand, incorporate, and accept what I had gone through.

MS- Why do you think you resented the guru?

LDS- For two reasons: because I'm a good person, and because I prefer to see the glass half-full. It wasn't hard to do. The final act of forgiveness was very interesting, because a few years later, (my children were older by then) I found out that he was about to die. I talked to my sister, who still believed in his teachings and who was in charge of taking care of him, and asked to go see him. I had to promise her that I wouldn't talk about the past nor demand anything of him. I simply wanted to stand in front of him and experience a complete and utter forgiveness, to know that I had overcome this chapter. And I had. In reality, what I saw was a person consumed by his own madness, so small, so insane... That's the image that remains in my mind. I wonder, "How could this man ever have so much power over me?" But I came out of there very happy to see where I stood and where this man was.

MS- How did you continue to search for meaning and truth in your life in the following years after you had left the group? How did you recover from this period in your life? What was your new philosophy in life? What did you do then for a living?

LDS- When I left the group I thought that I had, in reality, failed, and that I had no other choice but to go ahead and live, not the life I had imagined for myself, but the life I was able to have. I slowly realized the manipulation and the lies I had been subjected to; he had even stolen from the wealth I had produced myself, which I had a right to. I decided to create a new nougat factory and to compete against the group's one, which I used to work for. I rented a factory, went to each supermarket, and started producing and selling a new brand. At this point, I went into a dark, depressive phase (I wasn't married nor did I have children back then). This is when I went to a psychologist because emotionally speaking, nothing could make me happy. I did not want to do anything but produce nougat and rise financially. I had no desire for anything because I was

emotionally crushed and I hadn't yet developed the desire for new things. Everything was gray. I lacked interest in anything. I thought that after having tried and having thought that I could discover the truth, everything had little importance. Finding a new meaning to my life took time.

I eventually discovered that you give meaning to your own life as you go. I didn't want to assume any new doctrines, I didn't want to be Catholic, and I didn't want to be a Buddhist. I didn't want to belong to any group, nor a political party, nor a sports team, etc. I wasn't interested in the feeling of belonging or in any of those constructions that make up such an important part of people's lives. More often than not, they do not question anything because it's nice to belong to something. I had no sense of belonging with my old high-school classmates because I had broken up that connection; I had no sense of belonging with my family because I had destroyed it; I had no sense of belonging with friends because I almost didn't have friends. I didn't have a faith or religion that could sustain me, so I was facing life completely on my own, against myself.

So I said to myself, "I can choose the meaning I give to my own life!" A process of finding new interests and things that I liked began. I asked myself what I wanted to do with my life, with the advantage that I already had a small company, which eventually came to be the biggest nougat factory in Costa Rica two years after I started it. I was even able to have a share of the company I had started in Barquero's group, which I had left to my brother. I decided to go to the University of Costa Rica, but I dropped out after some time because the process was too slow and unsatisfactory. Later came an opportunity to learn how to export to the United States, so I went to Arizona to learn about economic, marketing, and legal aspects of trade. I saw the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, and made new friends.

I made the effort to push myself forward. When you are given lemons, you can let them embitter your palate, or you can make lemonade. A difficulty may bring you down or you can move forward. "Crisis" in Japanese means opportunity for change.

MS- What conclusions and understandings have you gained overall? What advice would you give out to others? What is your outlook on life?

LDS- Do good to others without looking to see who receives it. Live in freedom. Do not allow anyone to impose ideas on you what may go against your closest beliefs. Work hard, don't spend much, and only buy and use what you truly want and need, and not what others try to impose on you. It's a philosophy of not becoming too attached to life and material things, and of enjoying whatever little or whatever much you may have, without letting anything enslave you. It is about being more than having. Enjoy activity. Laugh about the small things in life. Enjoy the simple things. Be awake, and do not grow confident in what you have or what you have achieved.

I am happy to have told a little bit about my life for those who may read it. You must know that freedom is within the human experience. Freedom, or liberty, does not mean that you are free to do whatever you please, because if you do not know where that wanting or desire comes from, you are done. That desire is often imposed by forces that aren't yours. Freedom implies consciousness, self-knowledge. Freedom without self-consciousness and without self-knowledge is not freedom. That's all I can add to this.