

Dar Papaya Project: Youth Activism in Colombia

by Everett Wilson

*I first met Sarah Weintraub in Tassajara, a Zen monastery in the Ventana Wilderness of California, two hours drive southeast from Monterey. I'd been practicing at Tassajara for four years, and Sarah had come to Tassajara for the first time—as a student. Both her parents, Linda Ruth Cutts and Steve Weintraub, are ordained Zen priests with dharma transmission, so Sarah grew up in San Francisco Zen Center, but she'd never formally taken up Buddhist practice. Now she was in Tassajara, practicing Zen, and joining me in a writer's group, and every time we met to write, and share what we'd written, she read to us her experience of living in Colombia as a peace activist. In late April, I revisited Tassajara, and bumped into Sarah again, where she was preparing to spend the summer cooking meals for the summer guest season in Tassajara. She'd just returned from Colombia again, after filming a documentary titled, *The Dar Papaya Project*, with her close friend, Kore Oliver, covering a youth delegation hosted by the Fellowship of Reconciliation Colombia (FOR). Sarah has worked with FOR Colombia for years, so she knew the women leading the FOR delegation, and the Colombians representing the human rights organizations there. I sat down with Sarah, her co-producer, Kore Oliver, and Liza Smith, one of the leaders of the FOR Colombia delegation that Sarah and Kore filmed. I conducted three separate interviews with these remarkable women. In my first conversation with Sarah, I stumbled into a much larger question than I had realized:*

EW: Why papayas? How did the *Dar Papaya Project* come to be?

SW: There's a very Colombian phrase which is "*dar papaya*." It's a phrase which means, if you translate it directly "to give papaya." "*Dar*" is the verb "to give." I've only heard the phrase in Colombia, and it has a very Colombian, very specific, but multi-layered meaning. It's actually one of the themes of what we're doing in the film.

But the way that I've most often heard it used, the phrase as you almost always hear it, is "*No dar papaya*."

"Don't give papaya."

What it basically means in most contexts is, "Don't get yourself in trouble." Don't tell people more than they need to know. Don't share anything you don't need to share. Don't make yourself a target, and that could be politically, or it could mean don't wear your big camera on the front of your chest and walk through bad neighborhoods. So in the cities it's mostly used in that way. *No dar papaya* means don't put yourself out there to get robbed—don't fling your wallet around, or talk about how much money you have. *No dar papaya*. Don't be giving away all your papaya.

In the rural region where I lived when I first lived in Colombia, it was used more in the political sense. If you're going through a military checkpoint and they start asking you questions, don't tell them more than you need to, don't start telling them "I'm a member of the peace community, and you all shouldn't even be here and you're all corrupt..." It's just giving them papaya, giving them ammunition to use against you. So it means keep a low profile. *No dar papaya*.

So we chose the title for a few reasons. I like the way it sounds both in Spanish and in English. In Spanish—in Colombian Spanish, anywhere else it doesn't really mean much—but in Colombian Spanish it has a kind of edginess to it, because you always hear the phrase *No dar papaya*, so calling the project the “Dar Papaya Project” is already a little bit edgy or pushy.

EW: You're already giving away the papayas?

SW: Yeah, people start asking “What kind of trouble are you making?” It's a “rocking the boat” kind of feeling.

But I also just like the way it sounds. And I think it also reads in English, it sounds kind of like tropical, slightly unusual, so I think it works whether or not you actually understand the phrase.

We thought about putting a definition of the phrase on our website, and when I tried to come up with a definition, it was like what I just told you—I mean it's a paragraph long, and there's all these different variations, and people take it in slightly different ways, so we decided not to put up a definition.

For those who know, they know.

People who've lived in Colombia, or who are Colombian, or who've worked in Colombia get it, and have different takes on it. Some people say, “Oh that's so cool!” And other people ask, “Why did you call it that? What are you trying to say? Are you trying to make trouble?”

So aesthetically we liked the way it sounded—both in Spanish and English—and then in the meaning... On the one hand we're not expressly trying to *dar papaya*. We're not trying to make trouble, or trying to give ammunition to be used against us, and at the same time there is a feeling that we're not *not* trying to do that. We're not *no dar papaya* either. We're gonna talk about what's going on, and if people don't want to hear it, too bad. And that's the edginess, and that has a lot of resonance with the Colombians who we work with.