

Wandering Without Destination: Reflections on a Mexico Journey

By C. Forrest McDowell

In flight to Portland, Oregon, I am listening to gentle music while peering down to the verdant earth below, somewhere over Northern California — a far contrast to the arid Mexican landscape I have lived in for the past two weeks. I have long perceived the world through the fear that it is so incomprehensibly big that I dare not venture past my imagination of traveling within it. However, I now ponder a new discovery: that I am capable of embracing more of the world because I have now touched a small part of it in Mexico with my hands, feet, eyes, and heart.

At age 58, I have often thought of myself as old and world-weary. However, in light of my visit to Mexico, this description is no longer accurate: I feel not so much old as worn, that is, well experienced, well loved, and well used, like a favorite teddy bear. I have also used the analogy of a touchstone, smoothed with age and the wisdom of life experiences. In my advancing years, I too would like to feel worn like such a touchstone. Mexico has given me a helpful and deeper understanding of that analogy. Its people, cities and landscape appear worn but not worn out.

We sat in temples over 400 years old, their haunting presence softened and humbled by geological age and human use and prayer. The front wooden stoops have been scalloped smooth by thousands of souls desiring the same personal connection to a God more lasting than their hope to survive each day. Whereas these spiritual bastions are endlessly adorned with the images and icons of Jesus Christ's suffering and crucifixion, they have weathered all personal doubt that each person can transcend their own unique pain and suffering.

It almost seemed orchestrated that the last temple we visited in Mexico City stood at a precarious slant with strong cracks in its lofty ceilings and balustrades — a relic of earthquakes or a sinking ark in a depleted aquifer. Yet the church was still in use, its pews and knee rests smoothed by devotion. Outside, the frenzied maze of streets held its own marketplace of devotees: thousands of buyers and sellers fidgeting among the countless stalls and makeshift stands. The contrast was both shocking and acceptable — we have to find a way to live within

our heart in solace, as in this church's sanctuary, and to let our heart live within the world in celebration, as in the marketplace just outside these doors.

On our journeys into numerous Mexican towns among the highlands, Tricia and I prioritized regularly sitting in meditation and prayer in temples both haughty and humble. Our country, the United States, had just begun a war in the very cradle of civilization and religion on this planet, the country of Iraq; this to rid a so-called tyrant and threat to both our citizenry and others around the world. We had left our country just as the war commenced, so we found comfort in such ancient temples if only to release the burden of our dismay.

On our last morning in San Miguel de Allende, we sat one last time in the Paroquia, the central gothic church of the city. I anticipated a quiet time of prayer and reflection. After a few minutes, however, I heard the muffled weeping of a young woman. Each passing sob intensified until her moans echoed loudly throughout the cavernous sanctuary. All the while her young children played cheerfully among the pews. Finally, I forgot myself and found her every sob permeating my heart: I became this woman — her sorrow, pain, sadness; her tears and pleading to the same God and Christ I believe in. Then, stepping outside of my own human limitations, I became these pews, sandstone walls, painted murals of Christ's suffering, and the worn wooden planks that thousands of humble feet have quietly touched for hundreds of years. I became the light peering luminously through the stained glass of every human's pain and suffering across the planet. Finally, in prayer I offered myself up as a well-used cloak of compassion offered to the many people suffering on this planet.

I suspect that the purpose of life for many people in this Mexican village, behind any of the hustle bustle, is really very simple: the elemental desire to survive each day. But not alone, God, not alone. If we have companionship, as friend or family, as neighbor or the person kneeling in prayer next to us in sanctuary, then perhaps we feel more capable of getting through the day. We have a sense, in short, that we are all participating together in the rudiments of daily struggle, alongside billions of other sufferers.

Many Americans, however, seem to have lost much of this "old world" sense of participatory compassion — that of living within a heart that beats entrained to the suffering of the world; that of thinking with a mind that includes the welfare of others as if they were kin. I wonder if I am such an American, one who has managed to insulate himself from the deplorable conditions of life in other countries; instead, traveling by putting all my concerns in the hands of

Frommer's travel guides, and not into the piercing eye-to-eye encounter with folk of a different colored skin and language.

While roaming the seemingly chaotic and packed streets in various Mexican villages, I am struck with this thought: Unlike many simple cultures, Americans have neatly and antiseptically stacked all of the world's steamy street marketplaces on the shelves of Wal-Mart. We have sterilized the seller-buyer connection: factored out the voice, leathery skin, peering eyes, stooped shoulders, wringing hands and hoary breath of trade and barter. Instead we buy and handle the goods of our Good Life as with medical latex gloves. We don't afford ourselves the opportunity to shake the hands of the maker; to touch the fingers that spun the wool; to see into the organic mind of this plain craftsman who created the beautiful colors and patterns of this particular rug we are in awe of.

And therein, perhaps, is the epiphany of my journey: the rediscovery of awe that lives even deeper within the well of compassion or passion. Western commerce and day-to-day relationships have little or no awe. Awe has been replaced either with greed and endless desire, or pity — a pity based in arrogance and hubris, not heartfelt compassion or sympathy; a pity that is characterized by a self-distancing sense of the “awful” and not the “awe-filled.”

On my journey I quickly desired to walk amidst what most Americans would probably view as the awful side of simple working class Mexican life — the places *turistas* dare not go. The taxi drivers know the American psyche, and naturally assume that every gringo wants a safe and efficient \$2.00 ride instead of a 30-cent bus ride with people who smell and dress like life sweatily reinventing itself in rhythm to the sun's daily dance across the arid plains and hills. When you sit on a bus next to a humble Mexican holding his pig, you become the multi-generational story of his life, family, casa, and parched bit of land. You have dined at his table until down the road he steps off the bus, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and quickly fades into the brown landscape. He knows where he lives, but I am always left with this question at such moments: “Where, really, is my home?” It is an existential inquiry meant to ask, “Who am I; what is my relationship to this world, and do I embrace life with awe?”

For the many humans on this planet who daily live hand-to-mouth, life is circumscribed in a one or two mile radius, if that, and their needs are mediate. My more affluent connection to the world consists of shopping lists, grocery coupons, bills to pay, and a subscription to Time

magazine. Most people eat with their hands and sleep on the earth; I eat with my eyes and revere my PosturePedic bed. Life writes its story on their face; I write about a life stored in my ink pen, choosing to let its fluid dark breath exhale as words on bleached paper. My life, for the most part, is imagined. Even my own pain and suffering is muffled by pride. I could never allow myself, my broken heart, to cry and wail in public, echoing amidst the muraled sandstone walls of a holy temple, as that young woman did. I am not that authentic yet. I am too concerned if the label of my shirt is showing in public.

I took a walk this evening, hours after our flight arrived at Portland, Oregon. We were staying with friends who recently moved to a tidy suburban neighborhood in nearby Vancouver. Unlike the evening walks in my colonial village of San Miguel just a few days ago — on dimly lit cobblestone streets crowded in by high stone walls and ornately carved wooden doors; a maze of narrow alley-like streets dripping with the smell of food, people conversing, music accompanying the prattle of passing cars — unlike such Mexican neighborhoods, in Vancouver this evening we walked through the aesthetically landscaped streets of an antiseptic “Pleasantville”: manicured green lawns, litter-free sidewalks, and not a human in sight, sound, or smell.

I am fortunate to live in my own privacy at Cortesia, my 22-acre sanctuary in Eugene, Oregon. But I have changed upon returning from Mexico. I feel like a child again, awakened from a terrible nightmare: the disease of adulthood in which I got an education, vocation, family, house, and car, all of which I should be proud of. However, my sense of “home” is different: less to do with place and time, or with a perfect setting or the right conditions in which to live there.

Now, this freshly awakened child-within feels the strong desire to go wandering: to taste the sweetness of diversity of cultures and Nature on this Earth. In this divine Earth Sanctuary I can wander in awe and reverence, without destination, and still feel “at home.”

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