

Mexico's Gifts to an American Girl

Ah! Mexico City in the 70's: horrific air pollution, teenage soldiers with machine guns, urban sprawl, corrupt officials.

As a twelve-year-old, I was excited and terrified to be living in one of the world's largest cities. A third-world, backward city, I thought, but a huge one.

What arrogance! As it turned out, this American pre-teen learned lessons in four areas of life that seemed primitive at the time, but are now popular, progressive movements in the U.S.

Fresh, honest food

My innate love of food and cooking was nurtured in Mexico. Contrary to the canned and convenience foods that made up the average American dinner in the 70's, Mexicans revered the process of lovingly prepared food made with fresh ingredients.

We bought avocados, chiles, limes, and tortillas at the market each day. Fragrant beans, moles, and stews simmered on the stove for hours. These entrees were supplemented with beautiful fresh pineapple, mangoes, watermelon, and papaya. A true culinary adventure!

Today, I see this concept repeated in the U.S. with an emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables and the "slow food" movement.

Skilled artisan crafts

The lifestyle and skills of pottery making, tile painting, ironsmithing, weaving, and the like were practically unknown to me. In the "go-go" U.S., white-collar jobs were the goal for most of us, and artisan skills were called "arts and crafts," relegated to hobby status.

In Mexico, however, the quiet dignity of skilled artists enchanted me. They believed in taking their time and doing it right. Nurturing a beautiful garden, laying a perfect stone column, or crafting an intricate cabinet were important and respected goals.

I have carried that enchantment my whole life, decorating my home with Talavera pottery and woven cloths. I now see respect for these artisan skills growing the U.S. but declining in Mexico,

except in the tourist trade. More and more, we revere beautiful handmade objects and respect artisans who embrace the creative lifestyle.

Ever-present religion

In my childhood, religion was assigned to Sunday mornings and occasional youth group outings. In Mexico, religion is part of daily life.

I saw pilgrims walking miles on their knees to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, penitents decorating roadside shrines with armloads of flowers and candles, and families picnicking and praying on their loved ones' graves.

Now, I continue to make religion a part of my daily life. There also seems to be a more pronounced role for religion across the U.S. Political leaders invoke God in their speeches, and discussions of religion in the workplace are common.

Giving up control

Because my family moved frequently, I worked hard to control the things I could while roiling from the things beyond my control. But nothing prepared me for the extreme loss of control I experienced in Mexico.

Sense of time there is notoriously elastic. It is considered impolite to say "I don't know." or "I can't help you." Thus, deliveries are guaranteed, directions are given, and promises are made regardless of the truth, or lack thereof, behind them.

Water and electricity were turned off at odd hours of the day and night. My school discovered that our bus driver had no license after an especially nasty bumper car session with a VW on the insanely fast-moving freeway. If a colleague or service worker actually did show up at the agreed-upon time and/or day, it was cause for celebration.

Although I shifted right back into time-controlled America, I have used this insight when I travel or conduct business in Latin countries. Many Americans are embracing the concept of giving up control: witness the popularity of the Serenity Prayer in talk shows, dinner conversation, and therapy sessions across the

country.

What goes around...

These are just a few of the ways that living in Mexico City affected me throughout my life. As it turns out, this “cultured” gringa integrated some very progressive values during her time in Mexico.