A GIFT FROM MEXICO

By Mary Blye Howe

Recently, during a trip to Oaxaca City, a friend and I sat having a late dinner in the *zocalo* (the public square) when a tiny boy approached our table. In his left hand he held a box full of little cellophane-wrapped packages of Chiclets, which he was selling two for one peso.

Approaching our table, he set the chewing gum down and reached for a little toy that I'd purchased earlier from another child. It was a malleable "face" which could be squeezed into different expressions. The little boy molded it into a pouty face, holding it up for me to see. I scrunched my face to look like the one he had molded and he burst into exuberant giggles, a perfect row of white baby teeth showing as he did. More funny expressions followed and, with each one, the little boy threw his head back and laughed like only a very young child can laugh, with pure uninhibited delight.

My friend Ann and I spooned some of our food onto a napkin and scooted it towards him. He sidled into an empty chair and ate, all the while playing with the rubber face. Soon the little boy's brother showed up and he ate with us, too. When they finished, the littlest one asked if the rubber face was a present for him and I said, "*Si*." His face lit up in surprise and pleasure.

I watched as the tiny merchant toddled through the *zocalo*, transfixed on the toy in his hand, kneading it into new forms, giggling joyfully while the sellable merchandise in his left hand drooped to his side, forgotten. I had given him such a small gift but he received it with such joy.

Often, during our week, Ann and I noticed groups of children pausing from their work to play games with one another or to banter with tourists whose hearts they stole with their bright eyes the color of rich soil. What was it about these children—indeed, the Mexican people in general—that they exuded such enthusiasm about life when it often gave them so little in return? As I thought about this throughout the week, a realization began to dawn on me and, as it did, I found myself rediscovering an aspect of life that I had lost.

• • •

Mexico is a land of extremes. By the 1970s, Latin America, had the highest gaps in wealth and income levels in the world. Mexicans in rural areas usually live below the poverty level and have little or no access to quality medical treatment. Powerful drug cartels can appear attractive to impoverished Mexicans with their lure of big money, and corruption among Mexican officials is well known.

THE POVERTY IN MEXICO CAN BE HEART WRENCHING. THE SIGHT OF A CHILD WORKING FOR A LIVING INSTEAD OF ATTENDING FIRST GRADE MAKES YOU WANT TO BUNDLE HIM UP AND BRING HIM HOME WITH YOU.

The poverty in Mexico can be heart wrenching. The sight of a child working for a living instead of attending first grade makes you want to bundle him up and bring him home with you. In Mexico when a child turns fourteen, he or she can be employed with a parent's permission. However, Mexican children much younger than this freely roam the streets, selling trinkets or begging, and others work in factories and on farms.

Some experts go so far as to argue that banning child labor in countries such as these may hurt children more than it helps them. They will work anyway, they argue, only they will be hidden more from public scrutiny and subject to more abuse. This idea may be offensive to many, but to others, it's an effort to live realistically. Certainly no one wants children living on the street or being robbed of an education. Some, however, choose to work for this end more slowly and carefully.

It's difficult for Americans to understand, then, or perhaps even believe in a Mexico where people are joyous and grateful for what they have. In Texas, where I live, hundreds of Mexicans attempt to cross the border every day. Yet what do they find when they get here? Do they discover the America of their dreams? Hardly. Many live and work in conditions that aren't much better than what they left behind.

One friend of mine, I'll call her Maria, came to America with her husband and three of their four children in search of a better life. Two years later she returned to Mexico simply because she missed the way of life there. Unfortunately, Maria's children had already forgotten much of their Spanish, had made friends in America, and wanted a refrigerator stocked with American junk food, none of which they had in Mexico.

In despair, Maria returned to America because of the desires of her children and, fifteen years later, she still lives here because of them. Not long ago, she stood wistfully looking at an oil painting of Mexico City that hangs on my wall. "Someday I will go back, Mary," she said. "When my children all have families, I will go back to Mexico."

While I deplore poverty and the problems that often accompany

it, happiness certainly doesn't necessarily accompany financial comfort. I've been without and have been happy. I've had my pockets full and been miserable. I believe my friend Maria when she tells me she was happiest in her home in Mexico, though she had nothing of the modern conveniences that she has here. And I believe others who have never left Mexico when they tell me (and more importantly, show me by their warmth and liveliness) that living like I live is not important to them.

• • •

For these reasons and others, the Mexican people have always captivated me. Their quick sense of humor, exuberance, and calm approach to stressful situations seem to be part of their genetic makeup. Even on jam-packed city streets, drivers whipping around other drivers, horns blaring, they seem to drive as if their feet were kicked up on a sandpile at the beach. Maybe road rage exists there, but in ten trips to Mexico, I haven't seen it. Drivers seem to sound their horns merely to relieve boredom.

When my friend, Ann, and I visited a few years ago, we chose to stay in the charming Hotel Gillow near Mexico City's *zocalo*. Bronze statues of Sancho Panza, David, and Don Quixote dominate the small, elegant lobby. Dramatic chandeliers—very American-looking—hang near the Mexican-style orange stone pillars. In the dining area in the mornings, Ann and I are greeted with glasses of orange juice and a basket of sweet breads.

Each day after touring the city, Ann and I return to our room to nap or to grab a snack. Hearing the elevator door open, the maid steps out of a room she's cleaning or turns from rummaging in the supplies closet to greet us with a shy but cheerful, "*¡Hola!*" Her long hours (she is here every day, early in the morning until late afternoon—or evening) never affect her graciousness.

During lunch hour masses of people scrunch together on the sidewalks of Mexico City, waiting in lines for food from street vendors, yet no one is rude or pushy. They wait patiently, the Mexican way, even in the biggest city in the world.

A Mexican minute is the opposite of a New York minute, a frame of mind that catches the unwary North American traveler off guard, easing him into a quiet and unhurried frame of mind, soothing his soul as he adjusts to the culture. It isn't about time, but about attitude—a sense of humor about the incidents of life, a laid-back, devil-may-care approach to whatever comes their way.

One afternoon, for instance, I walk down to my hotel lobby to request my safe-deposit box, where I keep most of my money. To my horror, when I open it, it appears to be empty. Panicked, I

WHILE I DEPLORE POVERTY AND THE PROBLEMS THAT OFTEN ACCOMPANY IT, HAPPINESS CERTAINLY DOESN'T NECESSARILY ACCOMPANY FINANCIAL COMFORT. I BELIEVE MY FRIEND MARIA WHEN SHE TELLS ME SHE WAS HAPPIEST IN HER HOME IN MEXICO, THOUGH SHE HAD NOTHING OF THE MODERN CONVENIENCES THAT SHE HAS HERE.

A MEXICAN MINUTE IS THE OPPOSITE OF A NEW YORK MINUTE, A FRAME OF MIND THAT CATCHES THE UNWARY NORTH AMERICAN TRAVELER OFF GUARD, EASING HIM INTO A QUIET AND UNHURRIED FRAME OF MIND, SOOTHING HIS SOUL AS HE ADJUSTS TO THE CULTURE.

demand that the manager call the police. In faltering English, he explains that there's no need to call the police because no one could have possibly opened the box.

"My money is gone," I repeat, handing him the box. He looks inside and shrugs his shoulders, repeating his statement that no one but myself could have opened the box. "Okay," I say, "if you won't call the police, I will." I'm visibly angry. I jerk the box towards the manager and as I do, my money slides into view. It had become wedged in a corner of the box and neither of us had seen it.

The manager throws his head back and laughs and laughs. Another employee comes into the room and the manager explains to him what happened. Both of them burst into a hearty round of laughter. "I'm so sorry," I begin, but he waves and says, "No no, it's okay," and they leave the room still laughing. This is great fun to them.

There's something spiritual about such a response, both in its lack of defensiveness and in its spontaneous delight over my blunder. To be so slow to anger, so lacking a retaliatory spirit! Each time I see that manager throughout the week I apologize and each time he laughs. Soon I'm laughing, too. However, I'll remember next time to not be so hasty with my accusations and conclusions—and I'll try to laugh a little more at the blunders of others, even when they're rude.

• • •

On Ann's and my third day in Mexico City, we take a taxi to the bus depot and purchase round-trip tickets to Oaxaca City. Several bus lines travel between Mexico City and Oaxaca City, and Ann and I opt for what the office of tourism describes as a first-class ride, avoiding both the luxury and economy rides. Not a single person at the bus station speaks English, so it's a good thing Ann knows a bit of Spanish. We buy our tickets and stop by the restroom, where we pay two pesos at the door for two squares of toilet paper.

When we board the bus, the driver greets us cheerfully, then heads to the highway, stopping at a shrine at the exit of the bus station. We wait while he pauses to make the sign of the cross on his chest. A few minutes down the road he stops and dismantles his speedometer. Soon we're zipping along narrow mountainous roads, the driver accelerating and veering onto the wrong lane at bumpy, hair-raising curves. (Think Mexican taxi driver behind the wheel of a bus traveling through the mountains.)

Ann and I sit in the front seat surrounded by gargantuan windows. Although I'm Baptist, I cross myself numerous times during the eight-hour trip to Oaxaca. Ann is Catholic but has trouble

crossing herself from her position—head between knees, groaning in terror.

During the milder moments of our trip (pre-Oaxaca, premountainous territory), Ann and I gape at the scenes we're passing. Public wells line the street at frequent intervals, fields of maize stretch everywhere we look, dogs pace the roofs of shanties in tiny villages, and an occasional billboard, usually a relatively small slab of painted rock, advertises Coke stands. One billboard, a replica of the Statue of Liberty perched on top, announces a "Grinn-go rest-bar disco show."

PUBLIC WELLS LINE THE STREET AT FREQUENT INTERVALS, FIELDS OF MAIZE STRETCH EVERYWHERE WE LOOK, DOGS PACE THE ROOFS OF SHANTIES IN TINY VILLAGES, AND AN OCCASIONAL BILLBOARD, USUALLY A RELATIVELY SMALL SLAB OF PAINTED ROCK, ADVERTISES COKE STANDS.

We pass graveyards which look like tiny villages, far prettier than most of the villages which the Mexicans actually live in. I don't know for sure, but somehow I sense that the Mexican people do this not only to honor their loved ones, but also to represent the beautiful place they expect to pass into after death. In life many of them live in shanties; in death, that will change, and their picturesque graveyards remind them of this hope.

It doesn't annoy our driver when, three hours into the trip, I become thirsty and unwittingly disrupt his schedule. Flipping out her Spanish book, Ann helps me write a note—*¿Detente por Coca?*—which I then hand to the driver. We hope it reads, "Do you stop for Cokes?" and assume it does when the driver reads the note, turns to us and smiles, nodding vigorously: "*¡Si!*"

Before long we pull over beside a shanty set up for travelers. A grill in front sputters with Oaxacan specialties, while a few women tend shelves crammed with snacks and Cokes. Vendors crowd onto the bus with iced barrels of soft drinks and baskets overflowing with candies and crackers and other edibles.

Ann and I slip past these vendors and approach an elderly woman who has been unable to board the bus with the younger vendors. We buy a big sack of fruit from her, carefully sliced from a prickly pear cactus. Ann and I had tasted the fruit earlier in the Indian community of Teotihuacan. Although it has the appearance of kiwi, it tastes sweeter and juicier; so much so that you don't mind the numerous hard seeds that fill your mouth when you bite into it.

The bus driver accepts a piece from our bag and then we pass it around the bus. Most of the passengers accept a slice with robust gratefulness. We share our large bag of flaky pan cookies also, obviously fresh and homemade, which we had purchased from another vendor who had not been strong enough to crowd onto the bus.

When we reach the mountains, all the vendors—indeed, all signs of civilization except for cars—disappear, and our driver becomes animated. We pass dozens of buses and semis—and our driver

ONCE IN OAXACA CITY, ANN AND I FIND A ROOM AT THE HOTEL GALA DE OAXACA. SINCE IT HAS ONLY MEXICAN AIR CONDITIONING (AIR WHICH YOU HOPE WILL BLOW INTO THE ROOM WHEN THE WINDOW IS OPENED), WE SLEEP EACH EVENING WITH THE SOUNDS OF THE *ZOCALO* INVADING OUR ROOM.

waves cheerfully to all of them. Pressing his horn repeatedly with his left hand, he sweeps his right hand in a wave that reaches from one side to the other of the gigantic windshield. He never stops smiling.

I'm disarmed by someone who can find simple joy in a drive which he makes daily, traveling the same route and often meeting the same buses carrying sleepy cargoes of passengers back and forth from Oaxaca to Mexico City. The monotonous routine of such a job doesn't appear monotonous to him at all. He's happy to have a job and, evidently, to have one that surrounds him with people.

Furthermore, I later realize that the bus driver's stops (a total of three) had probably been made because I had asked, since we roll into the Oaxacan depot about forty-five minutes late. "*No problema*," the Mexicans say to what would be to us the gravest inconvenience. Indeed, this is just the courteous, laid-back Mexican way of life.

• • •

Once in Oaxaca City, Ann and I find a room at the Hotel Gala de Oaxaca. Since it has only Mexican air conditioning (air which you hope will blow into the room when the window is opened), we sleep each evening with the sounds of the *zocalo* invading our room. It's the noisiest place I've ever visited. Horns blare until two or three A.M. Men's cat whistles drift in from six stories below. Sirens scream above all the other noises once or twice each evening. Finally, about four A.M., the city grows silent, only to come alive again at five A.M., loud voices surrounding the hotel and car horns letting us know that we're probably the only ones on vacation. Nonetheless, the spirit of the Mexican people daily softens my grouchiness caused by lack of sleep.

During lunch the next day in the *zocalo*, I feel someone grab onto my shoulders. Immediately, a little head swings around and grins at me, two inches from my face. "*¡Hola!*" the little boy says. I give him a few pesos and a few minutes later, he and another little boy skip by licking ice cream bars.

As we eat, vendors wander through the *zocalo*, and Ann and I buy woven bookmarks, wooden letter openers, small oil paintings, carved toothpicks, twelve packs of Chiclets, and give small donations to four beggars. One little boy places three toothpicks in a row, then counts them: "*uno*, *dos*, *tres*." He looks up for approval. "*¡Bueno!*" we say. He smiles and counts them again. A waiter pretends to look at him sternly but calls him by name and laughs, asking him if he's found an *amiga*. When we're ready to leave, the waiter brings us a bill with a big zero on it. He tells us our lunch is on the house.

Before Ann and I leave the *zocalo*, we buy a squishy stress ball

that Ann says will be good for the bus ride back to Mexico City.

• • •

Although Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico, some of the residents have made a good deal of money crafting and selling exotically painted wooden creatures. Originally the locals carved these animals as toys for their children; however, tourists fell in love with them and soon small, crudely built "malls" sprang up here and there to cater to the demand.

A taxi driver named Sergio agrees to show us around Oaxaca for two full days for five dollars an hour. Our first morning, we drive to the homes of people who craft inside small sheds. One owns a large home (by Oaxacan standards) perched on the side of a mountain. Pomegranate and avocado trees fill the yard and surround his workshop, which is built onto stilts so he can look out onto the mountains while he works.

The workshop bursts with hundreds of crafted animals, some of them costing two or three hundred dollars. I purchase a small psychedelic gecko that now climbs my office walls and an equally colorful feline that sits perfectly erect on my bookshelf.

Between visits to the numerous archeological sites, Sergio takes us to a pretty, outdoor restaurant in the middle of nowhere. We insist on buying his lunch, although he resists for a good ten minutes. Because we can't read the menu, the cook leads us to the kitchen where several steaming vats hold different types of food. We point to the items we want. No one else is in the restaurant so everyone who works there comes outside and gathers around our table. Later, they show us the still where they make mescal.

I ask Sergio about the children who beg in the *zocalo*. He says many have no mother or father and sleep on the streets. The police watch out for them. He seems puzzled, then aghast, at my questions about their safety. No one would ever hurt them, he says emphatically. People watch out for them, they don't hurt them.

• • •

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I've come to see that much of the Mexicans' contentment springs from their pious and grateful hearts. Anywhere you look in Mexico you're likely to spot a shrine. They lie outside bus depots, all along the highway, in the parks, the *zocalo*, and near the markets. And there is always someone there, praying.

Indeed, cathedrals highlight Ann's and my visit to almost every city, community, and Indian village—Arrazola, El Tule, Teotitlan,

ALTHOUGH I DIDN'T REALIZE IT AT THE TIME, I'VE COME TO SEE THAT MUCH OF THE MEXICANS' CONTENTMENT SPRINGS FROM THEIR PIOUS AND GRATEFUL HEARTS. ANYWHERE YOU LOOK IN MEXICO YOU'RE LIKELY TO SPOT A SHRINE.

Yagul, Mitla, Oaxaca City, and Mexico City, among others. My sister says the cathedrals in Europe are even more astounding, but while I've never seen them, I know this isn't true, for the cathedrals in Mexico are always full of people. They are used cathedrals, their beauty enhanced by the throngs of worshipers who frequent their shrines and attend their masses all day long, every day of the week.

ONE OLD WOMAN, A CLOTH THE COLOR OF AN UNRIPE ORANGE DRAPED OVER HER HEAD AND FLOWING DOWN HER BACK, CRAWLS SLOWLY IN PENANCE, OBLIVIOUS TO THE CROWDS OF PEOPLE AROUND HER, TOWARDS A SHRINE DEDICATED TO A SAINT.

One old woman, a cloth the color of an unripe orange draped over her head and flowing down her back, crawls slowly in penance, oblivious to the crowds of people around her, towards a shrine dedicated to a saint. Leo, our uninvited but welcome guide, tells us he's a Protestant and doesn't need saints, but later, as Ann and I walk through another part of the cathedral, we see him quietly saying mass with a group of Catholics.

Often Mexican tourists pause at the glassed-in cases holding images of Jesus and of various saints, tenderly touching the glass with their fingertips and then pressing those same fingers to their lips. People pray at most of the shrines, while others light candles, kneel at altars, or participate in a service. The piety is contagious and fills my heart with a longing to experience such a tender and consuming faith.

At Tepeyac, on the outskirts of Mexico City, we were taken to a trio of cathedrals called the Guadalupe shrine, in which a modern cathedral sits alongside two other more ancient-looking ones. We were told services are held every half hour, seven days a week, from six A.M. to eight P.M. The afternoon we were there, the church was nearly full.

Outside, Ann stopped to buy a rosary for her mother. The woman who sold Ann the rosary took her money and then made the sign of the cross across her breast. Each time Ann and I purchase anything anywhere in Mexico, the vendor crosses him- or herself.

One night, after admiring some of the colorful, original oils hanging on the wall of the Hotel Gillow, where Ann and I stayed in Mexico City, I asked about the artist. The young man at the front desk explained that the artist lived around the corner. He motioned for us to follow him.

It was 10:30 in the evening as the three of us slipped out of the hotel, walked a couple of blocks, and then, with a light rain falling, turned onto a quiet, brick walkway. A few doors down was the Hotel Buenos Aires where Señor Luna, the artist, lived.

Inside, the lobby was bare except for a simple front desk. We walked down a wide hall to Señor Luna's room. His door was open and he stood painting inside a room which was his home, a home about twice the size of my bathroom. Señor Luna greeted us warmly

and invited us in, but paintings took up the entire floor space so we stood in the doorway.

I expressed interest in his paintings and he said if I came back in the morning, he would display several of them for me in the hall. Many of his paintings were of small Mexican villages, an atmosphere of peacefulness pervading each scene. Most had brick walkways and brightly colored flowers draped over arches and cascading from windowsills and rooftops. All village paintings contained a cathedral or two. I paid Señor Luna's asking price, which included a wooden frame, without a thought of bartering. Señor Luna glanced toward heaven, crossing himself and whispered a prayer of gratitude. Then he grasped my hands and thanked me, also.

• • •

Weeks later, at home, I sit one evening gazing at Señor Luna's painting, which now hangs on my living room wall. Although there are no people in this painting, I can see in my mind's eye an old man sitting on the brick walkway, playing a guitar and pausing after each tune to remove a few coins from his hat, bringing them close to his face so he can determine their worth and, crossing himself, dropping them into his pocket. I see the merchants, unashamed to acknowledge God first, openly, for the good fortune of landing a sale. And I remember the little boy in the *zocalo* of Oaxaca, barefoot, dirty from head to toe, walking away from me, his giggles never entirely fading as the crowd's clatter enveloped him.

I had stopped giving thanks to God some years back, feeling facetious at the thought that God had given me anything while letting hungry, hollow-eyed children from developing and third-world countries starve to death. Yet in Mexico I had seen the dignity, hard work—and gratefulness—of those who choose to praise God instead of lamenting the paradoxes God sometimes poses. The Mexican people don't stop to analyze this or think it through. They just give thanks.

I had dropped a few coins into a hat, given away a little toy, shared a small plate of food. My Mexican friends, though, had given me something far more precious—a heart that desires to question less and praise more. I still don't understand the world's poverty and evil, but now, more than ever, I am keenly aware of its beauty.

I CAN SEE IN MY MIND'S EYE AN OLD MAN SITTING ON THE BRICK WALKWAY, PLAYING A GUITAR AND PAUSING AFTER EACH TUNE TO REMOVE A FEW COINS FROM HIS HAT, BRINGING THEM CLOSE TO HIS FACE SO HE CAN DETERMINE THEIR WORTH AND, CROSSING HIMSELF, DROPPING THEM INTO HIS POCKET.