

Learning from Mexicans

David Sweet

This from Mexico City, “La Capital” for Mexicans abroad (and Santa Cruzans during our first half-century). Elaine and I are visiting my daughter Angélica, psychotherapist to refugees and torture victims; son-in-law César, psychiatrist and mental hospital administrator fascinated by schizophrenics; and indefatigable grandsons, six and four, for whom Legos, costumes with capes and Captain Underpants presently loom large. These are hard-working, comradely, fun-loving people, wonderful parents and seasoned denizens of the City, full of lively talk about family, work and the popular culture and politics of this place. You learn and laugh a lot, just hanging out with the four of them.

This teeming, gorgeous city exhausts me nowadays. Elaine says it’s outgrown me. Terrible traffic; high rises where you could once take a picnic. Just now, as the dusty smoggy dry season comes to a close, it’s worrisome even to take a deep breath. But who can stay away? I came here first fifty years ago, just out of college. The City’s population was around six million then (now it’s pushing twenty-five). Seduced by its exotic bustle, I stayed five years, learned Spanish on the street, studied Mexican history at the National University, figured a way to make a living in NGO work, married and had kids, became a man.

The City trimmed back whatever I’d brought with me in the way of *prepotencia*, the peculiar notion that we Anglo Americans know all the answers anywhere, and are entitled to a bigger piece of the pie. Here I imbibed Mexican values derived from Catholicism (until then entirely alien to me), and from the sober, radical secularism of the Mexican Revolution. I learned about imperialism from the receivers’ end, shared the exhilaration with which most of humanity responds to any form of anti-imperial resistance, discovered the importance to people everywhere of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Since the mid-60s I've returned most years for a few weeks to visit family and friends, ransack newsstands and bookstores, savor food and memories. For two years in the 80s I ran a university study abroad program here. So, though always a foreigner, I know my way around a bit. Language is no barrier to learning on the street. The City has been my continuing education program; I am forever beholden to it.

This time, full of renewed hope for my own country (something Mexicans appear to share without exception), I've had an eye out for things happening here that suggest changes to consider back home. There are lots of these – especially in La Capital, where a progressive city government has guaranteed the rights to same-sex marriage and first-trimester abortion. Smoking is forbidden in public places; waste cans separate organic from inorganic; classical music plays in subways, dog walkers scoop the poop. Here's more:

Legislation now under consideration and public discussion would acknowledge the failure of the U.S.-sponsored “drug war” by legalizing (and taxing) the production and distribution of marijuana. Lab drugs will be a harder sell; but the trend is toward recognizing drug abuse as a public health rather than a criminal justice problem.

Television networks provide equal time to all parties in election campaigns; the better-funded can't buy more. So as not to squander the opportunity, both politicians and voters tend to focus on issues of substance.

Every Sunday a 30-mile circuit of wide streets is blocked off for runners and cyclists. The City provides free bicycle lending/repair modules at intervals to encourage the bikeless millions to get a move on. Neighbors enjoy hours of blessed silence.

A rapidly-expanding network of designated lanes with elegant “Metrobuses” supplementing the subway system has gone a long way towards improving mobility and reducing carbon emissions on major thoroughfares.

Recognizing the fragility of human rights observance, the City has created an influential Human Rights Commission to which citizens may appeal, and which focuses on public education. This official recognition of the dignity and worth of each human being is a long step in what for all of us is surely the right direction.

Reminders that as we Americans move towards “re-joining the human race” (if that’s what we’re going to be doing), we’ll do well to be on the lookout for things others have figured out better than we have. There’s something useful to learn most anywhere.