

## Chapter 4 – Teresa – Bridging Both Cultures

Teresa Rodriguez was born in Pachuca, Hidalgo, lived in Cuernavaca, but went to high school and lived for two years afterwards in the small town of Papantla, Veracruz Mexico. Papantla is the vanilla capitol of Mexico and near the archeological site of El Tajin. The native peoples of the region are the Totonac Indians, best-known to Americans for their *voladores* or flying dancers. In this ceremony, men “fly” by jumping off a platform on a high pole. One leg is tied to a cord wrapped around the length of the pole. This graceful unwinding of men down the pole is accompanied by haunting flute music. In the author’s own experience, Papantla is a unique place in a country that has a lot of unique places. It is very spiritual in one sense and the magic arts are quite in evidence to those tuned into such things.

Teresa is representative of educated Mexicans who have moved to the United States and work in responsible positions here. She did not come here intentionally to work, but because of love. Like many of the expatriate Americans who live in Mexico, the reason for their expatriation was more emotional than practical. She married an Air Force officer and lived all over the United States as well as Europe.

She currently lives in McAllen, Texas and works for the Chamber of Commerce there as Vice President of Community Development & Inter-American Relations. Much of her job involves acting as liaison between Mexican and US businessmen, so she truly works in both cultures. She is 46 years old.

McAllen, TX is in the extreme southern part of Texas on the Mexican border. It is across the *Rio Grande* from Reynosa, Tamaulipas.

*Teresa, can you explain a little about the foundation of Mexico?*

The people who came to found the United States were looking for freedom of religion or were running away from high taxes. In Mexico the Spaniards came because they were looking for gold. The Indians were not attached to the land. The land belonged to everyone.

The Spaniards came and the Indians saw them as gods, because we believed in so many gods. When they saw the Spaniards on horses, the Indians saw them as gods with four legs. From that moment on, the conquest was easier because we saw the Spaniards as superior. The Indians were servile, and easily dominated.

In the United States you didn’t have that. The Indians and the Europeans didn’t mix. The Indians were moved to another part of the country instead. While in Mexico the two cultures merged, a fusion. So here you had the culture of believing in a lot of gods and the Spaniards who were looking for gold. I’m not saying this about all Spaniards, but many of the ones who came were opportunists and looking to get rich quick. It was like they wanted to win the lottery and not have to work anymore.

If you go to Mexico, you will see that my people are very friendly and trying to help you, but also there are a lot of people who want to have things easier. That mentality from the Spaniards is still evident in some people. They want to win the lottery instead of working hard for what they want. And some people believe that in order to advance, instead of helping others, they have to step on somebody else's toes.

*Do you feel that it is more common in Mexico that people feel that they can't advance unless somebody else goes down, or at somebody else's expense?*

Sometimes it is harder. This is a very complex aspect of the culture. You have people who have knowledge and skills who work very hard all their life but they cannot move up the ladder, because there is somebody else who knows somebody that already got into the position even though they didn't have the experience.

*A lot of the people I have interviewed have sons or daughter who move to other counties after getting their advanced degrees because of this same thing. Most everyone says that the family is the most important aspect of the culture, which is overall taken as positive. But this could be a negative aspect of the family. Because of family connections somebody can advance. Is this correct?*

Yeah, it can happen like that, even though there are a lot of nongovernmental places where they don't allow a member of your family working in the same department. In the government, you cannot have a member of your family working with you. They changed that because the nepotism was seen as one of the reasons the government was so inefficient.

*Is there age discrimination in the workplace?*

One of the disadvantages is that the older you get, the harder it is to get a job. Here (in the USA), you can get any job at any age. In Mexico, it's not that way. We have a Social Security system where the last employer before a person retires has to pay the last installment before a person retires. So if they hire somebody in their twenties, the companies feel like they will get their money's worth from the employee. If they hire somebody older, they don't feel they get their money's worth.

*Care to talk about corruption?*

We Mexicans all love our country, love our culture. But in certain ways we are hurting our country, too, if we act in certain ways. For example, you are familiar with the *mordida*, no?

*[Mordida is slang for small bribes paid to police or government officials to expedite things. Mordida literally means, "little bite."]*

Here [in the United States], you would never offer a policeman a bribe. You'd be in trouble if you did that. But over there [in Mexico], because it takes more time to do things the right way, you might offer a *mordida* if you are in a rush. For example, if you get a ticket, the police officer takes your driver's license. You are supposed to go to the police station to pay the fine and get your license back. But the police officer might say, "But if you pay me right here, you can be on your way."

Even though you don't want to help corruption, because that is corruption, you have to think how valuable is your time? Both sides are responsible. The police won't stop asking you for money if they know people will pay. But if the police are getting paid such low salaries, they will keep asking for more money.

*Isn't that a paradox of the society – the issue of time? You just said that you have to determine how valuable your time is, and then decide what to do? It takes a lot longer to do things the right way.*

It is more inconvenient. And if you have a way that will make it easier for you then you say you might as well pay, right there and then.

*Do think that saving face is more important than time? Is the form more important than expediency?*

That is accurate.

*You live in the United States, you have a choice of where you want to live. Why have you chosen to live here?*

First of all, I came here to study and I met my husband here. Then I became a US citizen and my kids were born here. Here, if you work hard, you can have everything you want. In Mexico it is harder. First of all they pay you a lot more here and they value your experience more here than over there. Mexico is beautiful. I love Mexico and was going back and forth for nine years. Sometimes it is frustrating. You can work hard and one day find yourself without a job. There can be a change in government, there can be a change in the ownership of a company, and a company can go bankrupt. There is just more uncertainty.

*That is interesting, because, except for the change in government, the same things could be said of a job here in the United States. For example now (2008) we are in the beginning of an extensive economic crisis. Companies are going bankrupt, changing ownership, laying off people as never before. There is a great fear of uncertainty here, now.*

Yes, but it seems that the uncertainty is more constant over there.

*I have heard two sides to this question. One side says that women are treated better in the workplace and hired over men because employers perceive them to be more honest or at*

*least more efficient. Another side says that they are only hired for lower level jobs and don't get paid as much as men. Which is it, in your opinion?*

From my experience and I worked in a Mexican company for ten years, in the management there were women instead of men. I asked why that was and the upper management said the same thing that you said. They thought that they could depend on the women more. They will not go out and get drunk on the weekends and they will be on time on Monday. Yes, if they had children, of course they have to attend them, but even so, they are more responsible.

In my first job, I was working for a government office, in 1983, I was the youngest woman. At first it wasn't because I was a woman, but because I was young that it was unusual for me to achieve a position of responsibility. Now we are being more respected in that area. Because they know we can accomplish as many things as the men. Of course, right now you won't see a woman running for President of Mexico, but eventually you will.

*There have been woman governors of Mexican states, for example in Zacatecas there is a woman governor.*

Yes, Amalia Garcia Medina, PRD. She is the first woman governor of that state. She is the first woman governor in Mexico since 1989, the third in the history of the country. Women got the right to vote in 1953.

*My impression is that Mexico is a matriarchal society.*

That comes also from history. I don't know if you have heard of the Virgin of Guadalupe?

*Sure.*

A lot of Mexicans put her before Jesus or before God. I mean you can see all her images everywhere. But it was another way to conquer Mexico to make it easier for the Indians [to accept the Spaniard's Catholic religion]. The main person in the nuclear family was the woman. The men were always outside, men were always fighting, they were never at home. The women were the ones at home, the ones suffering, taking care of the kids, doing all different things for the families. When the Spaniards came they introduced religion as another way of conquering the Indians. When an Indian found the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Spaniards put it in the biggest church in Mexico. And to this day that is the most visited church in Mexico.

*[Author's note: It may have been a fortunate coincidence for the Spaniards that aided in their conquest of the Aztecs that the Virgin of Tepeyac or Guadalupe appeared where she appeared. The story is that between Dec. 9-12, 1531, the Virgin appeared to an Aztec who was originally named Quauhtlatatzin, [SPELLING CHECKED] but renamed Juan Diego when baptized. The Spaniards had razed all the Aztec temples they found,*

*including one to the goddess Tonantzin [SPELLING CHECKED] who was the Aztec equivalent of the Earth Mother. This temple was on Tepeyac Hill. Supposedly, the apparition (who appeared three times to Juan Diego and spoke to him in Náhuatl), asked that Juan Diego/ Quauhtlatoatzin go to the Bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga and ask that a church be built on the same hill. He was to present to the Bishop a bunch of roses (which don't grow in the region and certainly not in winter). He wrapped the roses in his cape and when he presented them to the Bishop the image of the Virgin was imprinted on the cape. The Basilica was built, the cloak put on display and is the most visited shrine in all of Mexico. The revolutionary Padre Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla also recognized the political significance of this unifying symbol of Mexico and adopted the Virgin of Guadalupe for the flag of his troops in 1810.*

Sometimes people ask the Virgin to do things for them. A lot of miracles are attributed to the Virgin Mary. And that relates to your question because the woman is the central or focal point of the family. That happens nowadays. Mother's Day is a very important holiday. Kids and family go to visit their mom on Mother's Day. Father's Day is important, but not as important as Mother's Day.

*That is another paradox of the culture. On the surface Mexico is a very macho or male-dominated society. Yet, from what you have said, and what I have heard from many other people, (more women than men), women control the culture in Mexico. Are men aware of this?*

No, because the men think they are the head of the family and they are the ones making the decisions. I think the women are smart enough to make the man feel this way. Nowadays there are a lot of women who are working to provide for their family.

*Are there more families now that have husband and wife working?*

Oh yes. It is becoming a necessity.

*Why is it a necessity now and it wasn't a necessity say, twenty years ago?*

Because they won't have enough money to provide for their families. Even the children are working now. I remember when you finished school, you started work, but now, for many people, it is not that way. But really, that depends on your social and economic status.

*Is there much violence against women in the culture?*

There is violence against families. But I do not want to give the impression that it is universal. There is the macho man who works, but spends all his money at the *cantina* and then comes home and beats his wife. The kids ask the mom why she does not call the police. She says it is because she loves him and he loves her. That is just his way of showing it. I think this is something more common in lower social classes, but I am not sure. So the kids learn from when they are real small that they have to accept it.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is a hot topic in Mexican society. Just as in the United States until the nineteen-seventies (and some say even today in some places) reporting such violence to the police is a waste of time. However, since there are more women police and since the culture is changing, the statistics on violence against women will become more apparent.

However, one thing that does seem to get immediate notice is violence against children. Whether it is because of DIF (the national system for *Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*) or the culture, but reports of violence against children are generally investigated.

*Elementary school is free for all children?*

Elementary, secondary and high school are free. Even some universities are free. States have public universities, a state school, that is free. But there are so many applicants. It is hard to get in. Education is free. UNAM (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*) in Mexico City is the most well-known, but each state has the equivalent of an UNAM or state university that is free. But each student has to take a test to qualify.

*What is the quality of the teaching in the public universities compared to the private colleges like Tech de Monterrey (Universidad Tecnológico de Monterrey)?*

When I was growing up, the public schools were better than the private schools. Public universities were growing, but now it is the other way around. There are so many students that are going to public school that the teachers are overworked. In the private schools, the pay for teachers is better. The qualifications are better. In Tech de Monterrey, for example, many of the teachers have doctorates.

Time is another issue. At public universities there are still strikes. You know that you might not get your degree in four or five years because you never know how many months your teachers will be on strike.

UNAM is recognized as a very good school but there are a lot of times the teachers are on strike, or some of the worker's unions are on strike.

[Author's note: This thought was echoed by a friend of mine who is now a high government official and could not be quoted. From his own personal experience, he went to a public university because he was brilliant but his family had no money for tuition to a private school. At the end of his senior year, his teachers went on strike, so things looked bleak that he would get his degree. Eventually he got his degree and began his career, but the challenge of going to a public school is certainly something that every Mexican kid has to consider if he is lucky enough to choose what school to attend.

The tradition of universities in Mexico being flashpoints of social unrest is a long one, and of course, subject to debate outside the scope of this book. What is important to understand in relation to the topics covered in this book is that this is one more area

where Mexican society is more complex than American society. We had our share of student unrest and schools under siege during the nineteen-sixties, as did the rest of the world. Today it is inconceivable to expect that a large state university would be shut down by a strike – either by teachers or students.]

*Now at the non-university level, there is currently a lot of controversy about the teacher's union. Is it the largest union in the country?*

One of the largest.

*People have told me that you can sell your job? Is this like the same practice at Pemex?*

Not exactly. It's called *la planta* (the base). You can transfer your position to a family member, but he or she would have to be a teacher too. And the job is transferred and the check comes to the new person. With Pemex, the person you transfer it to is supposed to be qualified for the job too.

*One conception that Americans have of Mexicans is that they are stoic, or accepting. Is this valid?*

Yes and no. The kids learn from when they are really small that you have to put up with something even if you don't like it. You have to accept it. But of course, that has been changing a lot. What we saw in our parents and grandparents, we don't like it anymore. It has taken years. Exposure to other cultures accelerates the change. That is a positive aspect of the TV. The children see another world, a better world. So you are going to work to achieve these things.

*But isn't this another paradox? The world you see on TV is a world of North American materialism. Some people say that this encourages people to leave behind their rich Mexican culture. Some Mexican people have told me that they feel they are losing more than they are gaining. What do you feel?*

In some ways they are. In a way this conflicts with the family tradition, the nuclear family. Being together and growing up together. I remember in Mexico you never felt alone. You were never by yourself. There was always somebody visiting or coming for the weekend – an aunt, a cousin, somebody.

*So it is safe to say that Mexicans are more gregarious than Americans?*

Yes. I remember that socialization was one of the things I missed so much in the beginning here. We were home alone a lot. We had friends, but nobody would just drop in and visit. Everything over there was an excuse to start a party. Here life is lonelier, more routine. Over there it is like party all the time.

Even when you go to visit someone in the hospital, everyone gathers together and starts talking and makes a party out of it. And of course you know that we celebrate the dead

with a big party on *Dia de los muertos* (Day of the Dead). Everyone gathers at the gravesides of their loved ones and celebrates their lives.

Mexicans do not distinguish between death and life. Death is part of life.

When I say 'party all the time' I mean it in this manner. After work, you are tired, but you get home and start talking about the job and then some friends come over and then some cousins and everybody gets together.

*That is an important distinction. When people hear 'party all the time,' as most Americans hear from tour guides, they think big fiestas with drinking and mariachis. It really means there are always friends getting together, right?*

Right. It is more like what you would call an active social life. But it is normal and nobody thinks anything of it. Here it is more structured.

*So many people have told me that older people are respected and appreciated more in Mexico than in the United States and since I have also seen this, it would have to be accepted as true. Can you give me some insight into why that is?*

Sure. From the time that you are little, you are told that you have to respect the grandfather or grandmother. They are the boss. As you get older, your mom and dad are the boss. You always respect adults. You don't talk back to adults. You wait until they talk to you before you start talking. I mean that is something that every kid learns. If you interrupt when two adults are talking, they get mad at you. Your mom or dad will say, "Do not interrupt. You do not interrupt adults."

And here! [She was emphatic about this]. A child can come into the room and talk to you like nothing! Nobody says anything.

*And I just want to verify that this respect for adults is still the same in today's Mexico – it's not just something that was true when you were a child?*

Yes. Absolutely it is still that way. We respect adults. I mean here, you don't have the *Usted* (the polite form of verbs, used when talking to someone of higher stature as opposed to the familiar form, *tu*) in English. Just by using the right form of the verb, you show respect.

*Do you think Mexican society is becoming more informal, that people are more likely to use the 'tu' form of verbs than when you were younger?*

Yeah, that is true. People are becoming more familiar. With that we are losing respect.

*Do you feel this has to do with American influence?*

Exactly. We tend to admire the United States. That is why we have been changing so much. We are trying to be a copy. [Laughs] And you know that a copy is sometimes not as good as the original.

*What do you feel about Mexicans who have come to the United States to work illegally?*

Yes, a lot of people come to the United States to work to find a better way of living, but the ones who return don't tell them the truth. I remember having one of the workers in the house in Mexico. His dream was to go to the United States to work. He finally passed as a *mojado* (literally 'wet one,' which means an illegal alien).

[She got really animated while telling this story because it is something she believes is]. This was before I had come to the United States, but I remember telling him, 'I don't think it is going to be all that easy.' 'Oh, yes, I am going north and I am going to work very hard and buy some land and buy a truck to come back. I have some friend who did that and bought this land for their mom, so I'm gonna go there.' Finally he went. After a year he came back. He was working for my family again. I asked him how it was. Sadly he said, 'It was nothing like I expected. My friends told me how much money they were making and came back with the car and the big boom box. For me it was different. First of all from the moment I tried to cross the border, they stole my money. Then we had to cross at night and be bitten by snakes. I saw people dying. Finally we make it to the other side. There were eleven or twelve of us sleeping in one little room. [Teresa got a sad look in her eyes as she related the rest of the story]. And then we had to work all day and all night to be able send some money to my family. The first time I tried to send it, a friend stole it from me. He told me I couldn't send it because I couldn't speak English, so he said to give it to him and he would send it. I finally started saving some money just to go back home. You know what, I don't want to go back any more.'

This isn't everyone's story. But my point is that the ones who have this kind of experience don't talk about it and the ones who do all right talk loudly. They don't tell the others how hard they have to work and how much they suffer. The ones at home just see the big boom box or the car or the land and don't think ahead to how much they must sacrifice to get them.

*What is most important for people to understand the Mexicans?*

To understand the Mexicans, you have to understand the way we act according to the events in our lives. To me for example there is a difference in language like this. We see death as an extension of life. Even when we are mourning our death, we make a party out of it. We get together, start drinking coffee or alcohol and before you know it we are telling funny stories about the deceased. The same when someone is sick and goes to the hospital. We come and make a party out of it.

Some people say Mexicans are very patriotic. I do not think that is right. *No somos patriotas*. [patriots] *Somos patrioterros*. The difference is like in the United States, we are patriotic and we are proud of the United States all the time, right?

[Teresa became very animated when talking about the following paragraphs. I found that many Mexicans got excited to find a foreigner who was truly interested in her culture. They really want us to know their country. Actually, our time had run out several minutes before and she delayed her next appointment in order to explain this to me. That is an example of how time is more fluid to Mexicans. It was not that the person who was waiting for her was less important than I, but that what she was doing **right now** took precedence. If you were the person kept waiting, if you were a Mexican, you would accept that and wait. If you were an American without understanding of the culture, you would take the delay as rudeness and be offended, when in fact, the delay was, at its root, based on politeness.].

In Mexico it is like we wave the flag and party on *16 de Septiembre* but then don't go to work the next day. We raise our flag and shout *Viva Mexico, Viva Mexico* to show we are proud of our country. The next day we throw trash on the street. How can we be patriotic if we don't respect our country? I got this from a wonderful book that explains a lot of how Mexicans think, called *La Idiosyncracia Mexicana*. Another is *Los de Abajo*. I recommend them for anyone who seeks to understand Mexico. We live our lives by old sayings, metaphors. Because that is the way we were raised. That is true today too. But we are not all like that. I don't want to perpetuate more stereotypes, but many people are like this.

*Thank you for your time.*

END OF INTERVIEW