

Chapter 5 – Rudy – Nahuatl Indian, Mexican, Philanthropist

Mexicans survive on hope and faith. Indians endure through fatalism and gods who favor them or bring them luck. I try to bridge the two cultures and bring a little hope to my Nahuatl brothers.

Rodolfo Reyes – the name flows off the tongue like the thick white fog rolls down the mountains and covers the lush valleys of Rudy's homeland, around the backwater town of Tamazunchale, San Luis Potosí. Add Rudy's full name, Rodolfo Jongitud Reyes and the flow isn't as easy or as poetic. It's like adding the full story of the reality of living in the hardscrabble villages in those valleys after the fog burns off.

I've known Rudy since neither of us had grey hair. We are the same age in years, fifty-eight at the time of writing. We've seen each other live, work and survive through the triumphs and tragedies that define all people's lives. When I lost the job writing guidebooks that had defined my personality for thirteen years, Rudy helped me see it in perspective. When my apartment burned down, leaving me possession-less and homeless, I nearly moved to Tamazunchale. When devastating floods made whole villages in his area homeless, Rudy asked me for help, not for him, but for his people. When Rudy's wife was killed in a highway accident, I did what I could to console him.

What sets us apart, what sets Americans and Mexicans apart, is not money or possessions, but support systems. I had a few friends and a sister who helped me over these traumas. Rudy had a whole village and a large extended family to keep him going. In the end, we both grieved, felt depressed, got over it and moved on. I don't know that the support systems Mexicans have makes keeping on keeping on any easier, but it certainly makes it less lonely. Americans are uncomfortable around tragedy; Mexicans accept it.

A Rich Man, But Not In Money

Rudy is a rich man, though his possessions are few and his income is small. His spirit is that of a Mexican Everyman.

Rudy, you have a good education, but you told me that you felt that you could not get anywhere financially. Do you feel that has anything to do with the fact that you live in a small town?

“Yes. I guess, I don’t know, see like me, I am comfortable here, it’s my hometown, my people. Here I know everybody. I would not feel comfortable if I went to a bigger city. I have friends, my family’s here, that’s what keeps me here. I lost my wife a few years ago, you know, but if I did not have my nephews, all my relatives, hobbies, I would be in the states probably. I have many friends in the US, they always invite me to go, but I cannot leave my family. I know I am not making much money, but I am happy here. I know the people, the natives they need me. I feel I am doing something good for them because nobody is doing anything about the country for example. I would like to do as much as I can to help the natives and to help the environment here. But nobody else seems to be interested. If I went to the US, I would not be happy. I’d rather remain here, poor as I am, and be happy.”

Rudy is a Mexican-Nahuatl Indian who was raised as a Mexican and learned to speak Spanish and English as well as Nahuatl.

He teaches English, is a volunteer fireman, and works to help others not for money, but what he gets out of it- which is nothing but the pleasure of helping others. He knows everyone, and they all smile and wave when he passes by. Going through town with him takes ten times more time than driving by yourself. Rudy has to stop and chat with everyone, keeping up with what’s going on, nurturing friendships. Being with him is like being escorted by the mayor, but I’m sure he’s more loved than any politician.

One Foot In Both Cultures

In a sense, Rudy represents today’s Mexican-Indian. Steeped in the traditions of his people, he knows the herbal bounty offered by the forests. He picks herbs as we walk, explaining how this one is good for this, how this one can be dangerous unless used in the proper dosage. He has a cell phone and keeps in touch via email.

Medical Care

“When I am sick, I first use herbal remedies. But sometimes they aren’t enough and I go to a doctor. I tell my people to do the same thing. We have an IMSS [social security]

hospital here and I help them too. It's like our religious beliefs. We are all Catholic, but that doesn't mean we can't pray to our ancient gods too. Sometimes one works and sometimes we don't know which one works, but are just pleased to get results."

But there is another reason why the natives turn to herbal medicine first.

I think I understand the Social Security and IMSS hospitals. If I work for a company my company pays so much and also some comes out of my salary, and it entitles me to go to the hospital and the Infonavit housing; the cost is based on my salary. What other benefits do I get?

Social security. You get doctors, surgery, and medicine. Many years ago people [doctors, nurses. Part of the bargain for subsidized medical schools in Mexico is that every graduate must work for two years in poor communities or small towns after graduation] came to help only the natives. We don't like it because the doctors here take care of the wealthy people in town and the natives always last.

The natives should be taken care of first because they come from far-away villages. They need to get back before it gets dark. They should but they don't. The doctors- unfortunately there's another example of corruption again. If you are a friend of so-and-so and they give them a little note, they put you in right away. You don't have to wait in line, you just go right through which is not fair to the other people waiting.

I believe that all people should be treated equally, that natives and wealthy people should be taken care of at the same time, equally. Get in line and wait your turn, but it doesn't happen here. So we don't like it. Like me; I don't have social security. I have no idea what I am going to do when I get sick. I hope I just drop dead, because I don't know what I am going to do. I don't get social security because I don't work for any industry, I work on my own. We can see that there is much corruption. I have seen myself that the natives are lined up with a number and a big-shot shows up, they go right in. The natives have to walk maybe 3 or 4 hours- they have to walk back too, so I think they should be seen first.

From Death Comes Hope

The death of Rudy's wife illustrates the changing Mexico. One of the few semi-trucks that still plied the old Pan-Am highway MEX-85 (most take the "new" Pan-Am highway MEX-57), veered into their lane, causing their car to crash outside of Cd. Valles. An ambulance arrived to take her to a hospital in Cd. Valles. Rudy was advised to stay on the scene so he could tell his side of the story to the highway patrol. Otherwise, everyone agreed, the trucker would make it out to be their fault. Rudy was more concerned with his wife's health than any legal ramifications. He went with her. The highway patrol investigated and fined the truck driver. While that may be small comfort to Rudy, it is an example of how Mexico is changing.

An ambulance and an honest cop are things we take for granted in the United States. In Mexico, they are being blown in by the winds of change.

[AUTHOR'S INTERJECTION: My own experience of forty years of driving around all of Mexico is that the perception of cops on the take is greater than the reality and probably will always be so. This stereotype seems to have become part of the public consciousness. There are occasional news stories about corrupt cops in the United States, or of people impersonating officers, but we don't make a great deal of them. One story about a corrupt Mexican cop (whether he is in Mexico City, a border town or in the interior) and he is perceived as only the tip of the iceberg of rampant rogue cops nationwide.

On the trip to gather interviews for this book, I saw two highway accidents in about three thousand miles. That's not unusual. What was unusual was that in both cases, there were ambulances on the scene and concerned passers-by that had stopped to help.]

Change – The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

Rudy, you've obviously seen a lot of changes in society in general. Can you briefly talk about how Mexican society has changed in your viewpoint?

More Shopping Choices

I know there are many aspects about this. For example when I was little there were not many things to buy in our town. We did not have many stores, many grocery stores and things like that here. People had to go to Valles at least to go to the store for many things

like to buy a wedding gown. Now we have practically everything like that here. That is one of the changes in the village. We no longer have to go to Valles or Tampico for things we could not get years ago.

My people don't have the money to buy these things. We believe that back 40 years ago our money would go farther than it goes now. Now many things are very expensive. There are many things that we cannot afford to buy that our ancestors could buy back then. To me it is a negative change.

Agriculture

For example, my father did much agriculture. He grew papaya, avocado, mango, corn, black beans, and he always had money in his pocket. Now the natives, they don't have money in their pockets. They just barely hang on. They barely sell what little they grow because our soil does not produce as much we don't know what is causing this; it is a contamination or acid rain or whatever but our land does not produce as much as it used to 30 or 40 years ago. People had more money. Like my father. Now the people try to work the land but they get discouraged because nothing grows as well as it did.

And this is completely apart from the situation of the industrialization of agriculture, large companies doing a lot of planting?

On yes. Agriculture is not industrialized here, not in the mountains. There are no tractors here. We use no fertilizers and try to keep things as natural as possible. We don't believe in putting out fertilizers or chemicals, but our land is not producing much really.

Why Young People Leave The Countryside

That's why many young people go to other cities for better opportunities and a better life. Some make it and some don't. Those who make it go to the States either legal or illegal and they send money to their families here. That money is to have a better house. They tear down the old hut and start building a new concrete house which is good but also when these people come back to the villages they drink too much.

Negative Effects of Immigration

Many of these people who go to the big cities they start drinking and smoking and doing drugs when they come back to the village, they have different ideas. That hurts our

people here. We have had many, many cases of AIDS in the community. People have gone to cities in Mexico or in the US and they come back very infected with AIDS. We now have lots of cases of AIDS in this area.

Men and women who have gone to work in other cities, they come home, they may have money in their pockets, but their health is down to zero. They die here. I have seen 3 young men who died of AIDS in the village. I tried to help them as much as I could, but it was too late, they died.

Yes, we have seen a lot of changes, like I said in traffic, noise, pollution. In the villages people who get married, as soon as they have a child or two they don't have the money to raise their families and the men take off. Sometimes they both take off; husband and wife take off and leave their kids with their grandparents. They go to work either together or separate and many times they don't ever come back. That's why we now have many old folks in the villages who are frightfully alone and abandoned.

Begging

Some people have told me that the people who beg- they could work if they wanted to. Do you feel that that's true?

Yes. I know the people who beg for money here in town, I know where they come from. I know their villages. I have been to their villages and I ask why people beg and they say they're too lazy to work. They have a piece of land that they got the government payment to work it [a program called] *comunidad*. They have their piece of land but they won't work it. They'd rather come to downtown and beg for money to live on because they believe they make more money begging than working their land.

Do they?

Yes. I have talked to them. I say to them, "Hey, I have been to your village and I know you have a nice piece of land." They say, "Yes but I make more money begging than working my land."

I don't know if you know anything about this, but on the border like in Nuevo Progreso on the Texas border, people who live there have told me that there have been changes in the beggars in the last few years. Now there are more indigenous people begging; they

mostly come from Oaxaca and Chiapas. What people tell me is that Mexicans there, middle class Mexicans, they essentially buy these people. They're indentured servants, they come to Progreso, they beg with their children to try to pay off their debts. Does this sound real?

Yes it is. I have been told the same stories. Not only beggars, but girls, teenagers who go to work either the border towns or cities within Mexico, they wind up in beer joints or whorehouses and they cannot get out of there. Somebody has them there, somebody buys them from the village or maybe threatens them, because I know I have talked to a few girls that I know and they say "I have to go back to work, I owe so much money." They're beautiful and attractive and somebody once they get them in Tampico or Monterrey they put them in beer joints, as waitresses or something but they are not making a decent life.

Social Net

Is there any kind of social net like in the US when someone can't work, maybe they are handicapped or just unable to get a job, our government gives them unemployment or if they have children they can get assistance like welfare? It's not a very good system. Is there anything like that in Mexico?

Yes there is, we call it *oportunidad* or opportunity. The federal government has had this for a few years now. They go to the villages and ask how many children there are per family. They write your name on a list and then they'll give you some money every month or every 2 months – especially unwed mothers. There are many, many unwed mothers in this area. Many girls go out to work and they came back to the village pregnant. They are unable to work with a child or two, and they have no job here, so they apply for help. The government sends people to the villages, or small towns like ours, and gets a list of all the people and helps. They get cash, food vouchers, and help for school; to send their kids to school.

I've read about the help for school. Supposedly the children have to go to school or the parent, the mother doesn't get any money. But some Mexican people have told me that they don't check. Is that true?

That's right, it's true, and nobody goes into the villages and checks. That's the problem with other government programs too. For example there is one called *procampo*, which means, "help to the country, to the people who work the land."

I'll give you an example. There's this project of help for the men. They [the federal government inspectors] go to the villages and ask a person how much land he has. If he has one *hectare* [10,000 square meters or 2.471 US survey acres], he can easily say he has ten *hectares* so they will give him more money. Since they never check, many people say they have more *hectares* so they can get more money.

We have a program similar to that in the US where the government gives a farmer so much money per acre to not grow food.

[AUTHOR'S INTERJECTION – Rudy was so flabbergasted at this concept that he very nearly fell out of his chair laughing. "You mean your government pays farmers not to farm? That is crazy."]

Now here in Mexico when the government gives you the money, they expect you to work the land?

Yes, that is to work the land. You can set out orange trees, mango trees, pigs, chickens, whatever, but you have to do something with your land but unfortunately I believe nobody goes to supervise this. Nobody knows what is going on in the villages. We have had inspectors but they come to town, they just talk to the people in the city, never go out to the woods in the small villages to see if it's true that that fellow has the land he says he has. I know people who are getting money for ten *hectares* when they have one or two. There is much corruption.

In your experience, is corruption getting better or worse. Is it different since the days of only the PRI?

I think it is worse. Here in Tamazunchale we have a lot of corruption going on.

A sense of being stuck

That brings up some Mexican people have told me that they feel stuck about life in general that even if they work very hard they are not going to achieve much. Other

people have told me they feel there is tremendous opportunity in Mexico, in the country, if you work hard you will achieve much. Overall what do you feel?

We believe that if we no matter what we do no matter how hard we work we won't get anywhere. Me, for example. I work very hard, I teach English and you know me. That truck I'm driving; I did not buy it, it was given to me from friends up in Texas. If not, I would be on foot. I could never buy a car. With the money I make I just enough to pay my rent, my light bill my gas bill and some food. I could have never bought that truck on my income. We believe we re stuck. We may be going back, we're going ahead, but we are not going forward, I believe.

Do you feel that is pretty common among people your age?

I think so, yes. But, because I work with people who have less than I do, I feel that it is important that I keep going. Let me tell you about my stove project.

Saving The World – One Stove At A Time

“In doing little things, we can accomplish great things. I cannot change the whole world, but I can affect global warming to a small extent and save lives to a great extent with a fifteen-dollar stove.”

Rudy's main passion is bringing rude technology to the Nahuatl villages, in the form of inexpensive wood-burning stoves, which will save children's lungs from the tuberculosis and other lung-diseases exacerbated by wood smoke produced by the old ones.

He found the forgotten designs and parts for an energy-efficient wood stove in a Mexican government office years ago. Like many government projects that could have immediate benefit, the stove project was probably shelved for something more high-tech, expensive and requiring more study. In some ways, the Mexican government is similar to ours.

The stove is made from cement, straw, cow manure and dirt. It consumes one-seventh the amount of wood for daily cooking, saving the forest, and produces less smoke, saving the lungs of the people. Rudy makes and sells them for cost, which is about \$15, to villagers. He works with 245 Nahuatl villages in the area. Demand outstrips supply. Although Rudy spends a big chunk of his own income on them, he relies on donations from outsiders to do much more. Rudy makes less than \$800 a month (one of the lowest

amounts of any of the people you'll meet in this book) and considers himself financially comfortable. Because everyone in the town knows of his philanthropic work, the rent on his apartment is low (about \$100 a month), and little favors are extended to him by other Mexicans so that he can survive and do good works.

How Money Is Not The Measure Of How Someone Lives

That's another aspect of Mexican culture that most Americans and Canadians miss. Mexicans of limited means may not make large donations to charities (often believing [rightly so] that the money will be stolen by some bureaucrat anyway), but do in-kind donations to those who are deserving. Money is not the only measure of charity. A vendor in a market may add an extra half a kilo to Rudy's order of vegetables "by accident." A mechanic may "forget" to charge him for a part for his car. Richer people may "find" clothing that fits him perfectly. And so on.

Ecological Pragmatism

"The land around here is a natural treasure. The Indian people consider themselves stewards of the land. But let us not be blinded by idealism. People need to eat. And that takes precedence over the altruistic notion of preserving the ecology. Unfortunately some of the Mexican people see the land as something to be exploited for money. It's a universal story. I read the same dilemma happening in the United States. My job is to try to preserve the respect for the land and to help the Nahuatl survive while doing it."

Rudy has advanced himself because he learned to speak English and has an ebullient, out-going personality. Perhaps most importantly, he has boundless optimism, tempered by pragmatism. He is the only guide in Tamazunchale, though calling him a guide is like calling the Beatles a band. He certainly doesn't make a living at guiding. The small stream of foreign tourists to Tamazunchale dried to a trickle when the new Pan-American highway cut across the Sierra Madres at Cd. Valles in 1957. Tamazunchale is on the old, forgotten, Pan-Am highway 85. One of his passions is showing Mexican and foreign tourists the hidden wonders of the area on birding & butterfly tours, ecological tours,

camping and hiking. He is the only person who can provide foreigners entry to the Nahuatl villages. He is *un Tesoro* [a treasure] and *una Puente* [a bridge].

Dying Breeds Of Craftsmen

“Come, let me introduce you to the guitar makers,” he told us, gesturing with enthusiasm, his normal way of approaching life. We were in Rudy’s Jeep, which he did not own, but was “on loan” from a man in Seattle. We climbed torturous trails, navigated Jeep-eating ruts and forded a river to get to the point where we had to walk, to meet the *maestros de la guitarra y violinas*.

After a fifteen minute walk, straight up a mountain, we came to a clearing with a few wooden-walled, dirt-floored huts. This was the artist colony of Epigmenio Hernandez Ramon and Evasto Santos Hernandez who make guitars by hand, from local red cedar.

We were received with smiles and genuine warmth. Any friend of Rudy’s is a friend of theirs. Had we stumbled across this village alone, we would have been met with suspicion. The guitar makers are Nahuatl Indians, who shun outsiders. Rudy is the bridge between cultures. Brimming with pride, the guitar-makers showed us how they select the cedar, carve the neck and frets, then inlay an intricate design in the rosette around the soundhole [EDITORS – yep, that is what it is called]. These designs are generally some variation of a star, which in their legends, bring luck. Three days work nets these artists with 500 to 700 pesos. By the time a consumer gets his guitar-picking hands on one of these works of art, he will have to shell out seventy U.S. greenbacks.

“Economic problems in my country are not because people don’t work, or are lazy. There are not always enough jobs, but it’s not that simple. Even for people who work, there is too big a gap between what the worker earns and what a product or service costs the consumer.”

The last living violin-maker, Ignacio, lives in another valley. He makes violins by hand out of the same cedar for 500 pesos. It’s a local trade handed down, but the younger generation is not learning it and will be lost when these men die off. There used to be

woodcarvers who made animals but the last one, Rudy's cousin, died a few years ago and the tradition went with him.

“There used to be many woodworkers here, but the last, my uncle, died a few years back. There's no money in the craft and today's young people are more interested in learning modern skills like computers, or just moving to Mexico City or Pachuca to live in a big city. It's sad, but who can blame them?”

I left Tamazunchale with an uplifted spirit for having spent an evening talking to such a truly altruistic soul, but with a sense of sadness that such altruism is rare in the world. In a sense that is the effect Mexico produces on me, even after all these years – she lifts up my spirit with the attitude of her people, but it saddens me that there seem to be so many challenges. It's this dichotomy that makes my view of Mexico real. It is easy for a foreigner to see only one side of the equation. And there are other facets to this gem that make it so difficult to describe in two dimensions. But, like Rudy, it gives me a reason to keep on keeping on.

END CHAPTER