

## Chapter 26 – Roberto, Young Professional – “Americans Don’t Listen.” Cozumel, Quintana Roo

Roberto Vences works in the hotel industry, in sales and promotions. He is 36 years old and a very self-assured young man, typical of the young Mexican professionals. Cozumel is an island off the coast of the state of Quintana Roo, across from Playa del Carmen, not far from Cancún. It is a diving destination and popular with American and Canadian tourists, mainly divers, though it is also frequently visited by cruise ships.

*Are you originally from Cozumel?*

No. I was born in Mexico City, well, in Taxco in the state of Guerrero. It was known as the capitol of silver.

*Right, right. Popularized by William Spratling.*

[He perked up and laughed. Spratling was quite a character on many different levels and everyone over fifty in Taxco has a story about him.] Spratling’s life was fascinating apart from his Mexico adventures. His autobiography, *File on Spratling*, is full of life and characters, including most every artist and author from Mexico and the US and some from Europe during the 1920’s through the 1940’s. It’s quite a story. Lots of drugs, booze and sex. It is not for the prim to read. Out-of-print, but available used now and again. Library of Congress # 67-21097 from Little, Brown and Co, published 1932, 1967. More recent books about Spratling include *The Color of Silver: William Spratling, His Life and Art* by Helen Delpar as well as *The Silver Gringo: William Spratling and Taxco* by Joann Mark. Spratling claims he invented the margarita. A movie of his life, Hollywood-style was made in 1948, called *The Man from New Orleans*, by Warner Brothers.

The short version is that Spratling [1900-1967] was a rich silversmith and artist originally from Alabama and New York. Spratling taught at Tulane University in New Orleans. He was roommates with and collaborated with William Faulkner on *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles*. Spratling moved to Mexico City in 1929. He was friends with Diego Rivera and the artistic set in Mexico City. Spratling was responsible for Diego Rivera’s exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. He moved to Taxco in the 1931 and was instrumental in making Taxco a silver jewelry and a center for artisans].

*So you moved from Taxco to Mexico City?*

Yes, because of my work. I work in tourism. I have been living in and around Mexico for several years because of my work. I moved to Cozumel three years ago.

*Have you noticed changes in society in your time?*

Definitely. The world right now, because of all the technologies we have, is different. People are more awakening. When you were a kid and your mother told you to be quiet, you were quiet. Now, you tell a kid to be quiet and he is jumping, jumping, jumping. People have a lot more hunger for knowledge. And sometimes that hunger makes people to look for new things and try new things. In the past, people were afraid to do or try new things, because we didn't know. Right now we try them because we want to know.

In the past, you watched a movie and there was no violence. There was no sex. Now, you watch a movie and it is about sex and gore. It is not just violence – it is gore.

*What about families? Older people I talk to say the family is the most important part of the fabric of Mexican society. Do you think this is still true for your generation?*

[Without hesitation]. Completely agreed. It is still true that the family is the essence of the union in Mexico. Family.

*Have you lived in the United States?*

I was part of a student exchange so I lived with an American family for one month.

*Excellent. Can you give me your insight on the differences between American and Mexican families? For example, we also say that family is the most important thing, but what differences do you see in that between the two cultures?*

[Hesitantly – again, Mexicans are hesitant to express criticism]. Yes. The difference that I see is that the American family can live far apart and get together just on Thanksgiving Day or Christmas and they are still a family. But in Mexico family is always, always together. Even though they live in different towns, they get together and have lunch with the family. They are making phone calls every day. For example, my mother lives in Cuernavaca. I call her every day. My daughters are the only grandchildren my father has, so every time we are on the computer with the web cam, so he can see them, and so my daughters can see their grandfather. We are more physically united than American families.

*Many Mexicans have told me that if a family member had a disease like Alzheimer's or needed constant care, they would not put in a home – they would take care of them in the family. Do you feel this is true with your generation?*

[Emphatically] I totally agree. In fact, I have family member with Alzheimer's. We don't put them in a special hospital or asylum [this word is used more commonly than nursing home or 'long-term care' facility, but means the same thing]. We just keep them with the family.

*So how does the family work out who is going to care for them?*

Personally, I can tell you I have that example at home. My grandfather, the father of my mother, he lives with my parents. They are retired and they are taking care of him. But they are older themselves. I know that when it gets to the point that they can't take care of him anymore, I will have to take him. Probably I will not take him to Cozumel with me. Probably I will change my home to Cuernavaca to be closer to them. Usually in the family, it is not that a formal decision is made about who will take care of them. I want to do it and my brothers and sisters will respect that. Probably we will get together on weekends and they will take over for the weekend. It is not like, "It is your turn, no, it is your turn." No, it works out.

*Living in Mexico City is much different than living in Cozumel. How long ago did you move to Cozumel?*

I first went to in Cozumel on May 20, 1997. I moved from Mexico City where the pace of life is very hectic and stressful. Life in Cozumel was very, very peaceful. It is a small town with fishermen and quiet. I said to myself, "I could get used to this kind of life." So I went back to Mexico [City] and returned again in 2002.

*Living in Mexico City is exciting, right?*

It is.

*But do you feel like it is dangerous?*

No. [He spread out the word like a preacher saying 'God.' He got at least four syllables out of it]. It's like everything. There are specific zones in the city which are very, very dangerous. For example I am very tall for a Mexican and my complexion is kind of strong [dark]. So people don't really bother me. I have been walking in the bad neighborhoods with a lot of money because I had to pay some bills and never had any trouble, never got assaulted. For me, Mexico City is very safe. For example, I wouldn't walk alone by myself in Tijuana, or in Culiacan or Mazatlán. No, I wouldn't do that.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE – This is the first and only time I heard of anyone saying that Mazatlán is dangerous, and frankly, one of the few times I heard anyone say the Mexico City was **not** dangerous. I think it points out that 'danger' is really a perception, more than a reality. There is more danger from being killed or maimed in an automobile accident anywhere than of being assaulted anywhere. Yet, our perceptions of danger are exacerbated by media reports and oral traditions that glorify the danger of assaults – in Mexico City or Los Angeles or Culiacan. Yes, they happen, and are real, but we give undue attention to them because they are brought into our consciousness through media attention. For a good book on perceived, versus real fear, see *The Science of Fear* by Daniel Gardner, Dutton Books, 2008].

*That is an interesting observation. Yet we read so much about the high crime rate in Mexico City. Do you think that is over-exaggerated?*

Let's say there are some political issues associated with that. One year it is said that Mexico City is dangerous and then for three years it is not. This is the political cycle. I think it has to do with the politics. Like when the old politicians, the dinosaurs, were in power. The police corruption made that happen. Now, since the time of Vicente Fox, the change of the old government for the new one, it changed a lot.

[He became very thoughtful and reflective, speaking more slowly]. I mean it was difficult. But I mean we changed and right now Mexico City is safe. I can tell you that.

*Living in Cozumel, where tourism is the main industry, have you noticed a difference in the American tourists who come from when you first got into the tourism business?*

They are the same. I can tell you that they are the same. I have had the chance to travel to another destination in another country that is like Cozumel, a diving destination, and gets a lot of American tourists. The other destination doesn't offer the same service that we do. It really surprised me, because the hotel where I was staying, there was no hot water and very low water pressure. And it was really full of Americans. I asked one, 'Hey, how come you don't complain because there is no hot water or water pressure.' He said, 'Well, because I know that in this country, they have problems. If I complain nothing will happen.' Yet in Mexico, they would never accept that level of service. You cannot do that in Mexico. If you don't have hot water, people are going to start complaining. Why, because they are used to a kind of service. Because of the economic crises, they spend less money, but basically, they are the same. The dynamics of the tourism industry are the same.

*Do you think that most Americans who come to visit understand the Mexican culture, or want to learn more about it?*

[Again, he became very thoughtful and spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully]. Personally, I think that if you want to know one place, you need to know the roots of the place. For example, if I am going to Guadalajara or Zacatecas, the colonial cities, I need to know about the Spanish and the Conquest. I need to know what happened to help form these towns. For example, if I am going to Zacatecas, I arrive in a town that is full of churches. For Americans, probably, one church is the same as another one. Why am I going to see churches? Each one has a story and they are part of the history of the town. So if I am going to see a place, I need to know the history of that place to understand it.

*I have been told by some other people that in order to truly understand Mexico today, you have to understand the past. You have to understand the relationship between the Spaniards and the Indians and how the intermarriage between them eventually created La Raza.*

Yes, you understand the importance of *La Raza*.

[*La Raza* means literally, 'the race'. It stands for the mingling of the Spaniards and the Indians of Mexico to create the Mexican people. Hispanic Americans use the phrase to

signify pride in their Mexican roots. There is a monument to *La Raza* in Mexico City symbolically placed at the mingling of several important thoroughfares, including *Insurgentes Norte* and *Avenida Rio Consulado*. October 12 is celebrated in Mexico as *Dia de la Raza* instead of Columbus Day].

*Do you think that the younger people are as aware of their traditions as the older generation?*

In my part of Mexico, the Yucatan Peninsula, the native Mayans still speak Maya. But if you, as a foreigner, approach them and say you want to learn Mayan, they won't teach you. They guard their traditions from outsiders. But in the elementary schools, with the Mayan children, in addition to learning Spanish and English, there are classes in Maya to pass the culture along to the young Mayans. They are very careful about which people they share their culture and traditions with. They feel it is a treasure. They feel it is my thing, and I know with whom I am going to share it. Even within their family, they are careful about sharing all the traditions. If you are the black sheep of the family, you will not be taught all the traditions.

*I have read that the population of indigenous people is shrinking. Have you heard this?*

Certainly. It is true. It is because they don't want to share their culture, as I just said. I was watching the news about a year ago that in the Baja there was a small population of native Mexicans. I don't remember the group, but they were dying out. There were only fifty left. The government said, '*You are a treasure. What can we do?*' The people said, '*Nothing. If I die, I am gone. I don't have to teach my ways to outsiders. If you are not my people, I do not want to teach you.*'

*But in Oaxaca, the opposite is true, no? The native peoples and cultures are thriving in Oaxaca, yes?*

Yeah.

*If you had the choice, would you rather live in Mexico or in the United States?*

Well, I am weird, but I would prefer to live in the United States. [Again, he chose his words thoughtfully and carefully]. Why? Because living in the United States is very easy. It is hard what I am going to say, but it what I realized after thinking about this very thing for a long time.

American people, they are used to getting everything from technology. They are like mentally lazy, physically lazy. For example, if you go into the restroom in a public place and the water starts flowing automatically. They don't have to turn a lever. Mexicans are very inventive. They are always asking, 'what to change, what to change.' There is an old Mexican saying that in Mexico we can do anything we want. I know that being Mexican I am very inventive. I know that if I come to the United States, that I can do anything. I can be very successful. I know that I have more chances here than in Mexico City. Why? For

example, in Mexico if you are going higher, higher, higher, people are just pulling you down, pulling down.

There is an old story about a Mexican fisherman with two buckets with crabs ....

*Yes, the crab story. I have heard it from many people.*

Yes, it is part of our culture.

*So you really believe that if a Mexican begins to become successful, that other Mexicans will start to pull him down? And you don't see that in the United States?*

Correct. Who is the richest man in the world?

*Carlos Slim.*

Right, and the right-hand man of Bill Gates is a Mexican.

*I didn't know that.*

Yes, he is from Merida. I don't remember his name, but he is from Merida.

[Author's note: I tried to verify this with Microsoft and their PR department could not verify or deny the existence of such a person] We are talking about Bill Gates! The owner of the NFL Cardinals is Mexican. And so on. So there are plenty of opportunities for Mexicans in the United States.

*Would you call yourself middle-class?*

Yeah.

*Now there is credit to buy houses, yes?*

No. There was, during the last year of Fox. Fox was the president who opened up credit in order for people to buy houses and goods. That was one thing that I was really glad about. But right now, with the economic crises, it is tough. It is really tough right now to get credit.

Right now there are TV commercials reminding people that credit cards aren't extra money that you have, they just represent extra money. The credit card companies are trying to explain why they are charging so much interest.

But Mexicans are not like Americans, living all the time on credit. We are used to living on cash. That's because they didn't have that opportunity. It used to be very, very hard to get a credit card. In order to get one, you had to be rich. And the interest was very, very high.

*How about loans for buying cars?*

Yes, there is credit for that and everybody [the car dealers] is offering specials. But really there are not many sales. And there are car companies that are stopping production – like here.

*Do you think Mexico will be affected as much, or worse than the United States from the economic downturn?*

We are going to be affected, yes, but not worse than the United States.

*In conclusion, what do you think is the major misconception that Americans have about Mexicans?*

They don't listen. They don't have as much patience. For example, it takes more words to say something in Spanish than English. But our speech patterns are part of being polite. In Spanish there are two different words for 'you.' Americans just use 'you,' 'you,' 'you' all the time. It is kind of cold, the conversation. And fast. And that is why they don't listen.

*Thank you for listening to me.*

Thank you for listening to me. Adiós.

END