

Christmas and job loss

Sorry it's been so long since I wrote a dispatch, I've been home for three weeks visiting, lazing about, and recuperating. I've eaten lots and lots and lots of food that's not beans. Fortunately I haven't been missing school because all the education promoters in the *caracol* coincidentally decided to go give each other a month-long group training for the entire time of my absence. But tomorrow I'm flying back into Mexico City, and thence back to the autonomous Zapatista municipality of San Manuel. But not to Zapata.

The big news since last time is that I lost one of my three jobs in the Zapatista school system. If you had total recall then you would remember that I started out working only in Emiliano Zapata, the municipal seat, and then two different sets of temporary laborers with whom I worked building the clinic invited me to come teach in their communities, which turned out to be a 20-minute walk apart. Those communities are called San Antonio Samaria and Pancho Villa. I had already been commuting twice a week for several weeks when I mentioned what I was doing to the health promoter in Zapata, who asked if I had the permission of the authorities. At first I was, like, Well, yeah, of course, they had a big community meeting about it in Samaria and talked to the *responsables* there. But no, he meant the autonomous council that governs the municipality. I then learned it had been a rather serious breach of protocol for me to go work somewhere else without the permission of the autonomous council. That completely blind-sided me: since the people who invited me were Zapatistas, I assumed that if any authorization was necessary from Zapatista administrative structures they would have either taken care of it or told me I had to. But, no, the people who invited me had overstepped their authority in doing so. So I eventually had a meeting with the autonomous council right before I left to come home, and they said, No, Andres, it's too dangerous for you to be making this three- to four-hour hike between these two places twice a week, somebody could hit you on the head. Therefore you should teach only in Samaria and Pancho Villa, not in Zapata.

I hadn't been expecting them to say that at all. I thought they'd let me continue in all three jobs, which would have been fine though it's a heavy workload, or that they would tell me just to stay in Zapata where I'd been originally working, in which case I would have been heartbroken because I'm needed more in Samaria and Pancho Villa. That's where my favorite students are, and I feel far more a part of the community there than I do in Zapata. So they told me to do exactly what I would have wanted if I had decided I didn't want to commute any more. And not commuting will make my life easier because I'll have spend less time working and traveling, and it will finally give me enough time to separate the boys in Pancho Villa who are learning to count from the teenagers learning to multiply, but still. It was not easy breaking the news and saying good-bye to Dean and

Gene, the education promoters in Zapata, and to Renshu who organized the making of my tortillas. It stirred me up emotionally far more than I'd expected, I hadn't realized I'd become so attached to the place. I think this means it'll be extremely painful to say good-bye in Samaria and Pancho Villa come April, but fortunately April hasn't come yet.

On the morning of Christmas Eve I went into town with some of my older students. When we came to the river that used to have a bridge, we crossed by way of a diving dock tied to trees on both riverbanks. (Non-Wisconsin people, a diving dock is a platform of boards covered in carpet and floating on top of four barrels of air.) You pull the dock to you, get on, then pull on the rope tied to the opposite bank. After mud, river, and cow pasture we were all a bit dirty, which didn't bother me at all. I just figured, well, I'm often dirty here, this is after all the Third World, and I haven't had a hot shower since I renewed my visa in mid-October or shaved since Guatemala, who cares? I hadn't bathed the day before, and if I remember rightly I was wearing swim trunks and a t-shirt with a hole in the shoulder. And my hair was probably greasy. But for my students, going into the big city of Ocosingo was a special day, so they'd all put on their best clothes: plastic cowboy hats, button shirts, jeans, and boots that aren't worn out. Once we got near the highway they all spent a while cleaning the mud off their boots on the grass and then untucked the pant legs they'd been protecting inside their boots. I thought they looked pretty spiffy. More precisely, they looked like local peasant kids all dressed up for a day in the city because that's just what they were. In town I ran into Larry, the Pancho Villa health promoter. We were looking for a truck to take us back, and he talked to a truck driver in Tzeltal for a while. I could tell they were talking about me, and afterwards I asked Larry what they'd said.

"He wanted to know if you were married."

"Well, yes, lots of people ask that here."

"He says he has an unmarried daughter."

There's an old feminist joke that goes like this: Dress for success: wear a white penis.

On our way back I learned a new colloquialism. "To throw out one's fifty" means to take a dump, and "to throw out one's twenty-five" means to take a leak. (*Echar su cincuenta o echar su veinticinco.*) I think some Zapatistas don't realize that's a colloquialism, or maybe they just don't have the concept of colloquialism, because at the women's *encuentro* in La Garrucha they wrote "for 25 only" on some of the latrine doors.

For Christmas they had a three-day fiesta in Samaria. A fiesta with meat, which is something they're far too poor to have spontaneously or regularly. They'd worked out long in advance which 11 families would contribute pigs for the tamales this year. Apart from the pork tamales, which hot out of the pot ended up being my favorite meal I had in six months in Chiapas, the fiesta meant a dance and a horse race. I'll talk about the horse race first.

The horse race wasn't a race, although they did ride horses. They called it a horse race, *carrera de caballo*, which was what confused me. But here's what they did. They stuck two long poles in the ground, tied a rope between their tops, and hung a live rooster upside down from the rope. Then those competing ran at the rooster one by one to grab at its head, and whoever pulled off the rooster's head was the winner. They did this for a couple hours Christmas Day and the day after and went through maybe a dozen roosters. I said I'd expected them all to run at the same time, that that's how a horse race works in my country, and someone replied quite sensibly that in that case they all would have crashed into each other, they were only running maybe a hundred yards. They could have gone farther, though. Samaria has this enormous long open grassy space that the plantation owner made the peasants chop out of the jungle way back when, so he could land his little private plane, that was how he came and went back in the *ancien regime*.

The dance, being a dance, was a lot less fun for me than watching local guys tear the heads off live roosters (which, come to think of it, was kinda Ozzy) but it's probably more entertaining to read about. My students had all been, like, Oh, Andres, you hafta come to the dance, you need to look for your *pareja*. (By the way, I'd really like to see the Spanish *pareja* come into English. See, in English most people rather logically use the word "boyfriend" to refer to their boyfriend or the word "girlfriend" to refer to their girlfriend. However, I've met more than a few radicals who for one reason or another are too cool to use the words "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" in referring to their boyfriend or girlfriend, so then instead they say "partner," which just annoys the hell out of me because it has zero connotation of romance or intimacy and sounds like you're opening a law firm or a tractor supply company or something. This is a pet peeve of mine, and it's why I wish the word *pareja* would migrate into English. It totally could, too, because somebody who's too radical to call their girlfriend a girlfriend might think it's a nifty affectation to salt their English with Spanish because poor immigrants reviled in mainstream politics speak Spanish. And now I'll stop insulting people with whom I agree about almost everything.) So, anyway, I went to the dance. It was a gathering of young participants dancing on brick, ringed by old spectators sitting on benches, illuminated by one naked light bulb, with a keyboard player who also sings and programs a drum machine (*tecladista*) off to one side. He would do these sort of schmaltzy, syrupy keyboard songs about boys and girls, which made me miss me my Slayer, and then the actual boys and girls would sort of shuffle in place a

foot or two apart without looking at each other. Except for the ones who would actually hold the people they were dancing with, but shuffling near them was more common. Except they would only get together after the groups of girls had arranged themselves in little forts to hide from the boys and the boys had besieged and beseeched the forts until the girls relented and picked partners. So after watching for a while to see what you were supposed to do I walked in to find a *pareja* and dance, and for the first couple seconds it just felt the way dancing normally feels for me, like an unpleasant obligation that never would have been invented if everyone in the world were me. But this time was different: I caused a panic. When the local girls saw me walking toward the big group of dancers they said "El gringo, el gringo" in high squeaky voices and scooted away *en masse*. I tried twice with the same result, so then I thought, Hey, now this is mighty fine, I've just gotten myself a gold-plated Get Out of Dancing Free card, I can't be expected dance if everyone's afraid of me, now can I?

So I just hung out at the edge and talked with the adults. Upon being asked I showed some guys the first genuine U.S. dollar they'd ever seen, and I replied that no, I didn't know the destination of the big airplanes that go by overhead sometimes, and several times I explained why I wasn't dancing, which reliably made people laugh. Until I explained it to my neighbor Eldridge, who has the house closest to the collective *ejido* house where I sleep in the room with the medications. Upon hearing my story Eldridge said, Well, my daughter's not afraid, wait here. He went into the dance and said something in Tzeltal to his daughter that I assume amounted to "Daughter, you have to dance with this gringo, it'll be good for the family." So I danced with his daughter, who I think is named Maria. She stayed three feet away from me the whole time instead of the customary one or two, and she was even more diligent than the norm about avoiding all eye contact with her partner. Overall she seemed to be trying to give the impression that she wasn't dancing with anyone, she was just out there enjoying herself, even though she did look miserable. I assumed she was thinking something like, "Oh, my God! Everyone can see me here dancing with the gringo, this is so embarrassing, I can't believe my dad made me do this." And then as the last beat resounded she was gone.

And now the origin of this word gringo. During the Mexican Revolution the Wilson administration refused to allow Americans sell weapons and ammunition to the revolutionaries, although it allowed and encouraged selling them to the dictatorship. Angry at this, (perhaps in 1916?) Pancho Villa led his men on a cross-border raid. In retaliation for this raid Wilson sent General Black Jack Pershing on a punitive expedition into Mexico. Pershing's soldiers wore green uniforms, and the people of northern Mexico wanted them to go away, so in their limited English they would say "green, go!" And if you write "green go" phonetically as one word in Spanish you get "gringo." So the standard Latin American word for American implicitly means, Go away, you imperialists, take

your soldiers out of our country. Although most of the people who use it don't know where it came from, it is apt, we are imperialists and we should take our soldiers out of their countries, as shown with a sense of humor when Rafael Correa, upon coming to power in Ecuador last year, told the United States that we could keep our military base in his country on the condition that Ecuador got to have a military base next to Miami. The word has been used more and more loosely, firstly for the soldiers of Pershing's expedition, then for all Americans, and now I've heard it used to refer to people from Europe who, even if the Swiss government doesn't train torturers, in fairness do look and spend a lot like Americans if you're an indigenous peasant. And a guy from the Dominican Republic told me that poor Dominicans even use the word to refer to rich Dominicans, a little like how an African-American who goes to Haiti becomes a *blanc*.

When families in Pancho Villa or Samaria need money, they sometimes send one of their men away for a month or two or three to work in construction in the tourist industry on the island of Cozumel. My student Luigi, who's a not very educated but very bright 18-year-old, asked me to confirm or deny a rumor he'd heard from other construction workers there: Is it true that when you go to school in your country they teach you to make money? And I said, Well, when people get jobs they do use things they learned in school, like reading and writing and arithmetic and so on, hmmm, not sure I follow you. Yes, but do they teach you to make money? Well, we have that expression in English, but I've never heard anyone use it in Spanish, by *hacer dinero* [as opposed to *ganar dinero*, to earn money] do you mean drawing the dollar bills with a pen? And he's like, Yes, yes, isn't it true that in school you gringos learn how to do that? How else could anyone get that much money?

I once had an argument with an American girl with whom I volunteered in a South African AIDS hospice who insisted that she had fairly earned all the money she had. Afterwards I realized I should have said, be that as it may, you did not earn the *opportunity* to earn the money that you have.

Over New Year's I was at the women's *encuentro* with several excellent people who Mary Ann of the Chiapas Support Committee brought for the event. (One thing I have to say about Zapatista territory is that, although in my experience you meet very few Americans, like zero in two and a half months, you do meet much better Americans there than you do in the United States, the expense and inconvenience of the journey selects for people with an anomalously high commitment to solidarity with the oppressed and a certain modicum of responsibility, who of course are my favorite kind of people.) An *encuentro* is when the Zapatistas present their work to their outside supporters, and this one was special because only women were allowed to speak. There was a sign saying men cannot speak or translate, they can only take care of the kids, bring

firewood, make food, and clean latrines. Which is all highly laudable, but I thought the last thing on the sign was the most important: On January 1 we go back to normal. I thought the most powerful part of the *encueñtro* was middle-aged women standing up and saying what their lives had been like as indigenous women in the time of plantation slavery, but that was so awful and horrific that I don't wanna write about it now. I think I'll work it into a column a little later on.

Then I came back to the States for three weeks, where the election that won't happen for another nine months rules the news. It is, I have read, A Very Big Deal that the next president will be a white woman or a black man. On the one hand, I expect that would be wonderfully inspirational for American children who aren't white boys, as well as educational for sexists and racists. On the other hand, I'm skeptical of how much change it would be, apart from putting a new and different face on imperialism; Clinton is Clinton and Obama has moved right as he's risen. Several Latin Americans have told me how stunned they were during Colin Powell's tenure to see an African-American man ("*un hombre negro!*"), a demographic group previously known to them largely through Dr. King, Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali, lying to the world to start Bush's war. I'll make what I think is not a risky prediction: if one of these two historic first candidates becomes president then corporations will still rule, Palestine will still bleed, and millions of children worldwide will still die of diseases that could have been prevented or cured for a few billion dollars globally. Maybe I'm too cynical and pessimistic, but this election made me go back and re-read something I'd been assigned in AP government in high school, two sociologists updating C. Wright Mills classic work on the power elite. (In the 1950s Mills showed that, for all the talk of democracy and opportunity in America, the top positions in government, corporations and the military were held almost exclusively by white Christian men of similar outlook from upper-middle- and upper-class families. He called this group the power elite.) Though they were writing in 1998, their conclusion has struck me as more relevant than anything else I've read about this election: "The power elite has been strengthened because diversity has been achieved primarily by the selection of women and minorities who share the prevailing perspectives and values of those already in power."

I hope I'm wrong. But even if I'm not, I'm now going back to Chiapas, which is a more hopeful place.

Andrew

P.S. I don't wanna give the impression I didn't enjoy coming home. The people and the luxuries were wonderful, I just can't stand the politics.

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Any damn fool can get complicated. It takes a genius to attain simplicity.

Pete Seeger