

The illusion of gray created
by an arrangement of
alternating black and white dots



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Hilly Place of Frogs

La cuenta, por favor.

You don't get your bill in a Mexican restaurant until you ask for it. They allow you to linger at your table for as long as you like, but the waitstaff would never be so rude as to hand you your bill, thereby hinting that it's time for you to move on. Well, we never actually tested that hypothesis to its limit, but we quickly learned that if we were done, well, it was our responsibility to hail the waiter and ask for the bill: "*La cuenta, por favor!*" A lovely custom, in my opinion, compared to the frequent custom in U.S. restaurants where bills sometime arrive with the meal.

We encountered lots of other small and a few larger cultural differences that dented our expectations and punctured our assumptions, which is what makes travel such an entertaining, on-your-toes kind of experience. Finding myself in a situation in which elements of mundane existence that I normally snooze through, suddenly transformed into moments of uncertainty, kept me more conscious that usual, which had the added, beneficial side effect of making me more appreciative of detail in all parts of our trip.

We learned a few cultural lessons about restaurants and one or two about attitudes toward death. But first I should tell you how Scott and I came to Mexico....

¿De dónde?

Where do you come from? Scott and I flew down from Madison to Austin on October 23, where my sister Julie met us at the airport. She drove us to her new house — a stunning, modern structure of white plaster and glass and metal, a profusion of windows, gorgeous carved-limestone fireplaces, dramatic staircases, and elegant spaces. The living/dining space looks out through a dozen three-foot square windows onto a beautiful side yard of live oaks and wisteria twining above the patio. In spite of the two-story tiers of windows, the close landscaping conspires to make one feel isolated from any awareness of the streets and neighborhood just on the other side of the hedges. Which makes using the outside shower a sensuous but not necessarily an exhibitionist experience. We wandered through the house admiring the dramatic book-lined, skylit stairwells and enjoying Julie's excitement with her new place.

Julie's just beginning to think about how she wants to furnish her new home, and so the feeling of the place is very much a blank canvas; I expect that its ambiance will be vastly changed by the time we see it next. She brought furniture from her old, very tiny house, along with a couch and chair from her Excite office, from which she has now officially retired. But these few pieces of furniture drown in the oceans of space of her new home, which teeters on the edge of some future identity, waiting for furnishings that will

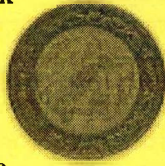


Julie's new house

transform it. Julie found a black slate dining table in Paris last month, but decided that it was impractical to have it shipped to the U.S. She did, however, find an amazing piece of art in Mexico during our trip — a solid block of black, igneous rock carved with Mayan designs by a wonderful artist we met — an Australian expatriate living in the mountains near an abandoned silver mine. That piece will eventually occupy a place of honor somewhere on the patio or beside the pool. It's clear that Julie's house will not be furnished out of an Ethan Allen showroom, but will contain unusual pieces chosen for their unique and beautiful qualities. I envy her the experience of making this gorgeous place her own.

We talked, we went out for food, and soon the house filled up with Julie's friends for the party scheduled that night in Scott's and my honor. We talked late into the night with good people, drank wine, and enjoyed some spectacularly good Brie cheese. Do you know you can get *triple-creme* Brie? Those familiar with travel in Mexico coached us on how to ask for bottled water without ice. *Agua mineral sin hielo, por favor!*

The next day came quickly. We had all packed lightly — a duffel or backpack each — and were soon off for a quick breakfast and a taxi ride to the bus station. Yes, the bus station. We traveled by bus to Mexico. U.S. car insurance doesn't cover you in Mexico, so driving was out of the question. Tales of bandits on the roads would have clinched the question if we had considered the matter seriously. Scott and I needed to keep our expenses down, and so had vetoed the idea of flying down to Mexico City. Julie tried to find out about trains, but information about the Mexican rail system was curiously difficult to get. Eventually, we hoped to return to the U.S. by train, but even in Mexico, no one seemed to know anything about train schedules. A guidebook said: *"For train buffs and the well composed, who don't mind if everything is absolutely off-schedule on a long trip, riding the rails has its merits."* We asked a Guanajuato travel agent about the train north from Leon, which is the closest major city to Guanajuato. She shrugged. *"Tren no sale de Guanajuato."* (Trains don't leave from Guanajuato.) She could tell us what and when buses left from Leon, but not from any other city. She had no information about trains. We looked around the office. On the counter, heavy glass protected sheets of paper



El peso nuevo

with *hand-written* schedules. There were no brochures with printed timetables, no computer terminals with access to a nation-wide system of transportation data. Our agent could tell us what buses left

Guanajuato and (lucky for us:) from Leon, but could not give us any information about transfer points beyond Leon or expected arrival times. Another cultural shock. There is no infrastructure in Mexico anywhere near the complexity we take for granted in the U.S.

Happily, the Mexican bus system is a good one, probably because it is so intensively used. Early Monday as we rolled through Monterrey, I watched rush hour traffic flow around us. There were some cars, about the number you might expect to see on a slow, early Sunday morning in Madison. But there were five or six buses in view at any moment. Lots of people waited at bus stops. Lots of people walked. Lots of people rode bicycles. Scott, Julie and I took a bus from Austin to Monterrey, where we transferred to another bus heading south to Leon.

¿Dónde está el baño? (Where's the bathroom?) was one of the few sentences I knew without reference to my phrase book, and we needed it at the first stop we made. The restrooms were actually in plain sight but we didn't notice them. We just weren't looking for a doorway lit up like a Christmas tree, with a door monitor and turnstile in front, into which it was necessary to deposit two pesos to enter.

On our return to the U.S. Friday October 29th, we traveled directly from Leon to Nuevo Laredo, on the border, and then boarded a different bus heading north to Austin. For the most part, we traveled by night in buses with fairly comfortable reclining seats, lots of legroom, heavy curtains on all the windows and a wall between the driver and the passenger compartment; it was easy to sleep. We may not have traveled as far as our friends who flew to Australia this summer, but we spent a comparable amount of time traveling to our destination. The trip down took 22 hours; the return trip took 21 hours. The view was more varied than clouds and ocean, the seats were more comfortable than a plane's, the regular army inspections were interesting, especially when they were accompanied by drug-sniffing German shepherds, and we brought our own snacks; nevertheless Scott and I won't be eager to take such a long bus trip again. Still, I'm glad

we did it this way, *this* time. Going through customs as the only English-speakers on the bus, watching the changing landscape and culturescape roll past our windows, was a good way to gradually accustom ourselves to the idea that we were entering a very different world.

Hable más despacio, por favor.

Please speak more slowly. That was one of the first sentences I memorized from my always-at-hand copy of *Fodor's Spanish for Travelers*. But it didn't help much. Most often I begged, "*Repita, por favor.*" With only a week in Mexico, I was eventually able to pick out strategic words from the avalanche of Spanish directed at us when we asked questions, but for the most part, I must have looked like a deer stunned in the glare of headlights whenever someone directed more than one sentence toward me. Nevertheless, navigating through a foreign culture and attempting to learn the language along the way was, for me, one of the highlights of our trip. Neither Scott nor Julie were as interested as I was in learning what we could of the language, so in situations that required Spanish, I became our little group's spokesperson. Nevertheless, Julie could usually do just as well or better using a fine command of sign language she perfected during her 1998 round-the-world trip. And Scott figured the only two words he absolutely needed were *cerveza* and *baño* (beer and bathroom). So we managed just fine.

I took two years of Spanish in high school a very long time ago. Professor Quintana, straight off a refugee boat from Cuba, was our teacher and he was more interested in learning English than we were in learning Spanish. In fact, we never progressed beyond present tense Spanish during those two years. My pronunciation got pretty good but I didn't have to work too hard; it wasn't necessary. Professor Quintana gave all the girls "A's" no matter what the quality of our coursework. What a gentleman! Knowing that I had mastered next to nothing of the Spanish language, I avoided stress during the foreign language segment of my SAT tests. I merely glanced at the questions, groaned, and then closed the test booklet and proceeded to fill in the little circles on the answer sheet in an artistic manner. Then I meditated till time was called. You might sneer at the sheer unlikelihood if this happened in a sitcom, but it really did happen to me: I aced the test. The University of Wisconsin offered me a place in fourth semester, college Spanish for my superior performance. I protested. They relented. I was placed into third semester Spanish and

proceeded to flunk every quiz and every test through the next six weeks. I was finally able to drop the course, much to the disgust of my teacher who scoffed at my claim that I had spent every conscious moment studying and struggling to catch up with the rest of my class. I took French for two years and was much happier. The French words, in fact, came so easily to me, there were times they seemed like the more appropriate words for a thing or an idea than the English words. It was as if I had simply *forgotten* my real language, French; that I wasn't learning it — but was *remembering* it. But that had never been the case with Spanish. So, as the bus moved south and up into the mountains and the heart of Mexico, I studied *Fodor's Spanish for Travelers*, assuming that I would have to start from scratch. I didn't expect to remember much of that long-ago, superficially learned language.

I am still amazed at how much came back to me. Not individual words, but sentence structure, articles, pronoun number (I, you, he, she, we, youall, they), and even some words. Even more amazing to me was that once I learned them in Mexico, they *stuck* in a way I don't remember ever happening in the classroom. I've obviously found the best way for ME to learn a new language. Full immersion. When I was about to walk into the post office to buy stamps, and I rehearsed the sentence that I would say, the words *stuck* — because I needed the words in a way I never believed I needed them in class. In Mexico, once I had memorized the words, I recognized them in other contexts. "*Quisiera diez timbres para las tarjetas a los Estados Unidos.*" I would like ten stamps for postcards to the United States. The woman behind the counter smiles at me, amused, humoring me, perhaps. I wonder what I really said. Nevertheless she makes the kindest assumption, hands over the stamps I want, and then I recognize the number she says when I ask her "*¿Cuánto?*" How much? I give her the money and she says "*Bueno, Señorita.*" I feel like a second-grader complimented for correctly mastering an arithmetic problem. We walk down the street and I see a rack of postcards and recognize the word "*tarjetas.*" I remember the word again when asking a waiter, "*¿Aceptan tarjetas de crédito?*" By the second day, I am speaking in full sentences. They are mostly in present tense, they are short, they are simple, but they are full sentences. In another weeks' time, I think I would have gotten much better at understanding people around me. I carry my copy of *Fodor's Spanish for Travelers* everywhere. I read it constantly, almost as intensively as if I am reading a novel. In the evening

I look up words in the larger Spanish dictionary we keep in our hotel room, our *habitación*. I fall asleep attempting to construct sentences in Spanish, reviewing the words I learned that day.

This doesn't help much when the phone rings at 5:30 A.M. Thursday morning and wakes us up. I am closest to the phone and I reach for it, still not conscious, thinking that it must be Julie calling from her hotel room. Who else knows we are here? Instead, I hear a flood of Spanish. "*Repita, por favor,*" I mumble several times. "*No hablo Español,*" I confess. "*¿Habla Inglés?*" No he doesn't speak English, but he slows down. I hear the word "*taxi,*" then the word "*aquí*" and then "*por usted.*" A cab, here, for me? No, no, no, no, I protest. I should have said, for me? for Jeanne Gomoll? *por habitación numero tres?* Because he has no doubt called the wrong room, but my mind is still not in gear, and all I can think to say is "*Tarde, tarde. Nosotros vamos tarde. No taxi ahora.*" Later, later, we leave later. No taxi now. Because it is true, we are scheduled to leave Guanajuato later the next day, by taxi. But he does not understand what I am going on about and suddenly apologizes ("*Disculpe, Seniorita.*") and hangs up. Or maybe he suddenly realizes his mistake. But, boy, am I awake now! **¡Buenos días!**

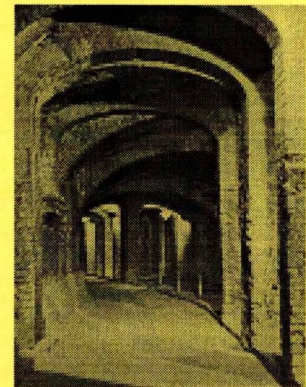
¿Adónde?

Where to? Guanajuato (GWAN-a-what-oh) is named after the Native Mexican word, *Quarap-buata*, or "Hilly Place of Frogs," although the only frogs we saw in Guanajuato were carved out of stone. The city is located in a famous silver-mining region, about 200 miles northwest of Mexico City. It's nestled in a high valley in the Sierra Madre range, at an altitude of about 6,583 ft., which together with its low latitude (23°L) means that its year-round temperature hovers in the low 70s° F during the day and in the low 60s° F at night. Lovely! About 113,000 people live in Guanajuato; it's not a big city but it's certainly a beautiful one — a maze of cobblestone streets and alleys that wind around steep hillsides, opening into vistas of beautiful churches and small plazas. The plazas are everywhere. In the midst of the city, one can always see trees and bushes and flowers — flowers everywhere! — not to mention the brightly painted buildings. Fountains or gazebos grace the center of every plaza and beautiful

churches front every plaza, and there is always someplace to sit and rest and watch people — a bench or a table shaded with an umbrella in one of the dozens of sidewalk cafés. Our hotel — *Hotél Posada Sante Fe* — is located in the most beautiful plaza of Guanajuato, *La Jardín Unión*. Its red and white tiled walkways, its lovely, carefully pruned Indian Laurel trees, the awesome Teatro Juárez, the imposing Templo de San Diego with its Churrigueresque façade, a gazebo in the center of the plaza, big enough for a medium-sized band, and the strolling mariaches, and sidewalk cafés, all make it a lively place. As with *La Jardín Unión*, most of the passageways in Guanajuato are restricted to pedestrian traffic. Cars are diverted under-



Churrigueresque architecture

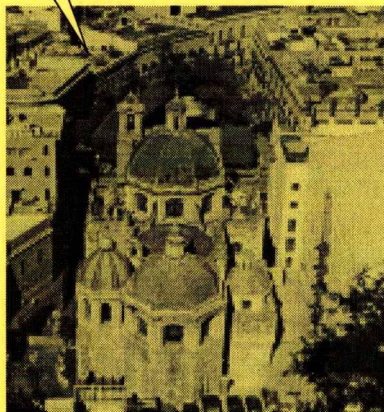


Underground roadways

ground into massive, gorgeous stone tunnels built upon the former riverbed of the Guanajuato River or in new tunnels built by local silver miners getting in a little overtime. The effect for Guanajuato is that the place feels like an old European city. It was a silver mining center, back when its mines poured out silver for the Spanish crown (and supplied more than 60% of the world's silver). Many of the most productive mines are played out (though 22 are still operating), and Guanajuato is more important now as a government seat (capital of the state of Guanajuato) and as a college town. In fact, it was while reading about the *Universidad de Guanajuato* on its Internet page that I realized that I might need to brush up on a little Spanish: "*Guanajuato offers the perfect learning environment with very few English-speaking inhabitants....*"

Julie found out about the city from friends of hers who had vacationed there. Another Austin friend, who speaks fluent Spanish, made

Our Hotel



La Jardín Unión

our hotel reservations for us. In spite of the word-of-mouth recommendation, American tourists do not overrun Guanajuato. We noticed five or six groups of English-speaking visitors during our week there, but for the most part, the tourists in this town seem to come from other parts of Mexico, Central America and South America.

We had a wonderful time wandering up the cobblestone streets and alleys, exploring new neighborhoods at each turn, discovering plazas unexpectedly, sampling Mexican cuisine at a different restaurant for each meal. We listened to the *Callejoneadas* — a procession led by a student minstrel (“*Estudiantina*”) who goes wandering through the side streets and alleys serenading. Everyone is invited to follow. We briefly visited the Hildago Market, a perpetual, indoor market built inside an old French railroad station whose vendors crowd into a vast space, sell fresh produce, exotic tropical fruits, and folkart. We toured the *Teatro Juárez*, with its opulent Moorish interiors and neoclassical colonnade, though we were a week too late for the Cervantes festival during which we could have attended a concert in this amazing building. We didn’t regret missing the special events too much though, since we learned that the city had been incredibly crowded for the festival. We visited several museums, the Pueblo Museum first, to which Julie led us, expecting to find archaeological exhibits. But no, this was the *Pueblo*, as in “the people” museum, and the exhibits were interesting but a little confusing. The Jorge Luis Borges exhibit, on the first floor, for instance, seemed to contain an environment evoking his fantasy short fiction. Each room was an existential experience in itself. One room contained a very large rock on a pedestal; we excused ourselves from another room thinking we had accidentally walked into someone’s living room. If only we had been able to understand the voices piped in through the speaker system or had understood more of the text posted on signs in the rooms!

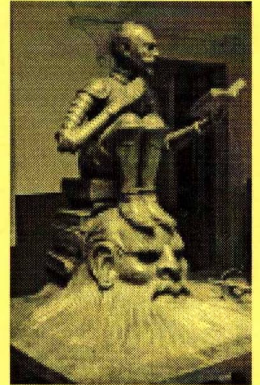
The Borges exhibit caused me to wonder if science fiction fandom exists in Guanajuato. Seems possible, considering the presence of the University and its large population of young people. But I didn’t see any posters or notices, so who knows...?

My favorite museum was *Le Museo Iconográfico del Quijote*, two floors wrapped around a central plaza with eight large sculptures of Don Quixote, each by a different artist, including

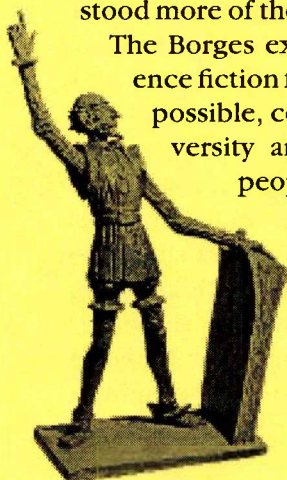
an abstract Mayan sculpture of Quixote as god, and several traditional sculptures of the knight and his squire, Sancho Panza. The rest of the museum contained hundreds of pieces of art — large and small, sketches, oil paintings, watercolors, pastels, etchings, collages, pottery, souvenirs, and textile art, by hundreds of different artists, in a vast array of different styles and levels of quality — all concerned with the image of Don Quixote

as a cultural and religious icon. We were all impressed by one room especially, whose walls and ceiling had been painted with frescos by the Mexican artist, Gabriel Flores, depicting Cervantes’ epoch tale. Cervantes and the actual, harsh conditions of Spain in which he wrote, were portrayed in realistic style, while the images of Quixote and his idealized world of good and evil were portrayed with an abstract, modern style — all in the *same* work. After standing and gawking for 10 minutes or so, I decided I had to buy the book for this work alone, I was so impressed. Unfortunately, our experience in the gift shop revisited the curious lack of published bus and train timetables, because we looked in vain for a book with photos of the exhibits. Mexican museums and galleries don’t offer published material for tourists who want more information (or just mementos). Most disappointing. We couldn’t even find postcards with photos of the frescos, and flash photography was forbidden.

My least favorite museum was *El Museo de las Momias* (the Mummy Museum), which was located on the outskirts of Guanajuato within the city’s main cemetery. Rigo, the guide we hired for a day and a half, drove us to this exhibit on Tuesday afternoon, explaining along the way that some strange combination of minerals in the soil around Guanajuato actually mummifies buried bodies within the brief period of one or two years. This process was discovered accidentally as a result of an equally strange local custom that requires relatives of the dead to pay a regular rental fee for their loved ones’ graves. If they miss a payment, the loved one is dug up by the cemetery management and removed from their not-so-final resting place. Anyway, someone noticed that these exhumed bodies were gruesomely interesting and decided to charge tourists to view the cemetery’s evicted residents. Rigor Mortis stretched the skin of the dead



Quixote/
Cervantes



Quixote

faces into expressions of horrifying pain, which (along with the bullet holes, knife wounds, and hangman noose scars) were perfectly preserved by Guanajuato minerals. The collection of vagrant corpses was at first simply leaned up against a corridor wall in what eventually became the museum. But visitors started breaking off finger bones and ... well, you can imagine ... *other* parts of the crispy corpses, so management found it necessary to inter their attractive exhibits within glass cases. Rigo led Scott and Julie and I quickly through halls lined with these grim glass coffins, pointing out a woman who had been buried prematurely, her epileptic fit confused with death, and the tiniest corpse — the fetus of a dead woman, still in its mother's womb. (I hope the anti-abortionists don't ever get hold of *that* image!) There may have been only one person that had been actually buried alive, but all of them looked as if they had suffered extreme pain and terror in their coffins, with their rigor-mortis stretched expressions. I was glad to zoom through the exhibit. Rigo had other sights to show us, and after a few corpses, I'd seen enough.



Mummy

cause of the treasures mined out of the hills that surround it. In colonial days, silver ore was carried up by female Native Mexican slaves in baskets upon their heads, up torturous, dangerous stairways carved out of solid rock within vertical shafts that plunged to depths of 1400 feet or more. Native Mexican men dug the ore from within caves that extended perpendicularly out from the shaft following the silver veins. Many of the men actually lived their whole lives in these caves because climbing the narrow rock steps (barely 18" square) terrified them. They lived in the caves with their mules, which, once lowered into the shaft, were also condemned to live their lives in the darkness of the caves. Nowadays the miners descend into the mines upon platforms driven by electricity, and emerge at the end of their shifts. The mine itself has been nationalized and is a co-op, owned by the miners. But it's still terribly dangerous and workers die regularly of black lung. We bought some silver jewelry (a necklace for me, a ring for Scott and a bracelet for Julie) outside the mine at ridiculously low prices and left, wondering how much money the miners are paid for their work.

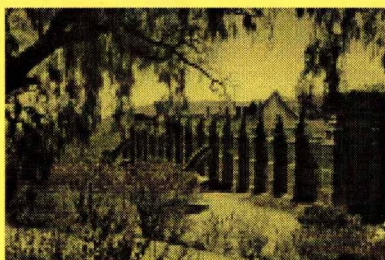
So after the gruesome mummies and our glimpse into the dark mines, it was an emotional relief to stroll through the beautiful gardens of the Ex-Hacienda San Gabriel de Barero, built near an awesome, carved rock aqueduct. It is an enormous place, with individual gardens devoted to most major nationalities, dozens of fountains, picturesque views, lovely bridges and a riot of color. It was a peaceful, invigorating place. We strolled, we snapped numerous photos, and we enjoyed some excellent tequila, or rather Scott, Julie and Rigo enjoyed the tequila. I diluted mine in the form of a delicious Margarita.

On our way home after that afternoon exploring the outskirts of Guanajuato, we drove to the highest point overlooking the city, on which the gigantic rose-colored *Monumento al Pipila* stands. The statue is visible from anywhere in the city, and at night this statue of a bare-chested man raising a torch in victory, is illuminated and dominates the horizon with an effect similar to the castle on the heights of Edinburgh, Scotland. "*El Pipila*" was the hero/martyr of the struggle for Mexican independence, who — by pushing a



la Mina de Valenciana

From *El Museo de las Momias* we drove north to *la Mina de Valenciana* — the Valenciana Mine, which is one of several mines in the Guanajuato area. The Rayas Mine, the oldest, was built in 1558, following its discovery by the Spanish. It, along with *la Minas de Guadalupe y Garrapata* which we drove past later on our tour, resemble medieval fortresses, with thick bulwark-like walls and stone buttresses. During the times of their heaviest exploitation by the Spanish, these mines provided over 60% of the world's silver, which explained the towering triangular walls of brick around the Valenciana Mine. Rigo pointed to them and told us they were built to remind everyone that the silver belonged to the crown. Guanajuato was the richest city in Mexico during the 16th century be-



Rayas Silver Mine

large rock in front of him for cover against gunfire, and by setting fire to a granary door with his torch as he was killed — made it possible for the people to capture a strategic garrison of Spanish soldiers. The Mexican revolution began in Guanajuato. Standing on the ledge built around this statue, you can look down on the city for a truly amazing view.

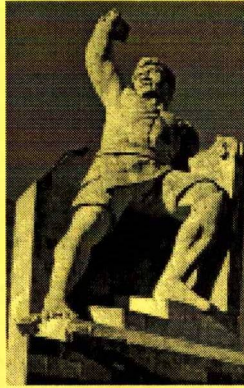
Before our afternoon tour ended, Rigo ordered our driver to stop deep within the underground tunnel system at the base of a narrow stairway leading up into the city.

We climbed the stairs and walked around a corner and found ourselves at base of the city's famous *Callejón del Beso*, or "Kiss Alley." At this passageway's most famous point, there are two balconies set just 27 inches apart. There is a romantic legend about two lovers separated by their parents' prejudices, who nevertheless engaged in heavy petting across the narrow gap. Rigo told us that any lovers that kiss on the step just beneath these balconies are sure to receive 15 years of good luck. Well, Scott and I took advantage of that opportunity right away. I asked Julie if she wanted to borrow Scott, and Scott mumbled "I'd get 15 years of *something* for that!"

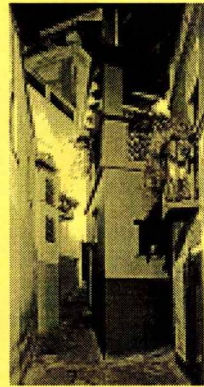
With that, our afternoon tour had ended. It was dinner time.

¿Quánto?

How much? You must be wondering how we felt we could afford to hire a guide, given the fact that Scott and I were concerned with keeping our costs down. Actually we hired a guide, *and* a driver, *and* a car for the half-day described above and then again, for *another* full day spent driving through the Sierra Madres. We were able to do this because of the very weak peso (the so-called *nuevo peso*, that was re-valued during Mexico's recession in the early 90s), which makes everything extremely economical for Americans in Mexico. A dollar is worth approximately 9+ pesos, which made it simple to figure out the U.S. equivalent price; one has only to move the decimal point to the left one place. Breakfast, for example, cost no more than 30 pesos, or three dollars. The most expensive dinner we ate, including wine, drinks, appetizers, the works, cost only 70 pesos, or \$7. We stayed at one of the best hotels in town during a holiday season and the rate for Scott's and my double room was less than 500 pesos (\$50). It was ridiculous.



El Pipila



Callejón del Beso

We tended not to dicker prices. In U.S. terms, the only expensive thing in Mexico was gasoline which cost more than \$2 a gallon.

Mexico, by James A. Michener

Scott and I drove out to Borders Bookstore a few days before leaving for Austin because I wanted to pick up a couple novels set in Mexico to read during our trip. One of the books I found was James A. Michener's novel, *Mexico*, but it wasn't until the plane had taken off on the first leg

of our trip, that Scott pointed out that the fictional city (Toledo) in which Michener had set his novel, was pictured on the novel's map *exactly* at the site of Guanajuato's location. Early in the novel, the main character stands at a vista point above Toledo (which reminded me of the ledge beneath "El Pipila") and describes a city set in a high mountain valley, so similar to Guanajuato's setting. The character points out an aqueduct much like the one in Guanajuato, and a silver mine which supplied 60% of the world's silver during the colonial period, just like Guanajuato. He gazes at a lovely central square with a magnificent church with Churrigueresque (elaborate sculptures) façade located at the head of the square, and the main hotel — the House of Tiles — at the other end of the square. His

description of the church precisely describes the *Templo de San Diego*, set at the end of the *Jardín Unión*, and although our hotel, *Hotél Posada Santa Fe*, lacks the façade of tiles of Michener's House of Tiles, it is nevertheless set at the end of the three-sided plaza which is itself surfaced with beautifully patterned red and white tiles. Bullfighting rings can be found in both Toledo and Guanajuato, too. The only major structure in Michener's novel that cannot be found in Guanajuato is an immense pyramid, placed there by the author to allow him to bring the ancient history of an Aztec-like race of people into his narrative. Later in the novel, *Mexico*, some characters visit Toledo's "Museum of the Dead" in which corpses, preserved by the peculiar mineral deposits in the area, have been put on display for visitors. Sound familiar?

I don't actually recommend this novel to anyone unless you are contemplating a trip to Guanajuato. Its plot is dull, its characters are mostly boring, and the main character's story is torturous and convoluted. It blends Mexico's war of independence with the civil

war of the next century, and thus dilutes and oversimplifies Mexico's politics. The novel's main contemporary plot (as opposed to the parts devoted to ancient Native Mexican cultures, pre-Spanish invasion, the Spanish colonial period, and the civil wars in the early 1900s) concern two competing bullfighters. The matador of mainly Native Mexican ancestry challenges the matador of mainly Spanish ancestry, and Michener uses their contest as a metaphor for the conflict of races, cultures and aesthetics in modern Mexico. Nevertheless, it was a fascinating book to read during our trip. I'd often greet Julie in the morning when we met for breakfast, by telling her what I'd learned about Toledo/Guanajuato the night before while reading before bedtime. For instance, I learned from Michener that the main meal of the day is taken at 2:30 in the afternoon. Supper is usually served at about 11 p.m. That explained the weirdly quiet restaurants at the times we usually ate. And when we saw maguey cactus in the countryside, I was able to identify it as the source of Mescal and Tequila, from Michener's hilarious account of how it might have been discovered by a group of ancient Native Mexicans he dubbed "the Drunken Builders." Michener's novel also provided me with much of my understanding of how Native Mexican slaves were brutalized in the silver mines.



Maguey

One of the most interesting parts of Michener's novel were his philosophizing upon the attitudes of ancient, historical and contemporary Mexicans toward death. The bullfight — more an artform than a sport — is Michener's central metaphor for this idea. Thoughts of death are unavoidable in this place — Toledo or Guanajuato — for all the artwork and customs that seem to dwell on the subject. *El Museo de las Momias* is an obvious example, as is the ancient Aztecs' bloodthirsty rituals (in which thousands of humans were sacrificed in a single ceremony by priests who cut still-beating hearts from victims sacrificed on top of bloody pyramids). Images of the gods who demanded these awful sacrifices are everywhere, and still an important aspect of Mexican culture. The Spanish conquistadors halted these grotesque ceremonies, but replaced them with their own gruesome customs. The Inquisition was of course starting up in Spain around the same time that Cortez's ships sailed into Vera Cruz, and so the Spanish brought along their own forms of torture. Furthermore, they enslaved much of the native population. In Guanajuato,

slaves were recruited by priests into a lifetime of slavery in the silver mines. Despite the availability of engineering solutions for the safe extraction of silver ore, the mine owners continued to send slave laborers down the steep and treacherous steps into the mines, because it was cheaper than investing in hemp and pulley systems.

One of the exhibits at an old silver mining museum where we stopped on Thursday, was a crude, six-foot-tall papermaché sculpture of an ancient, bloodthirsty Aztec god, into which had been plunged a gigantic crucifix decorated with images referring to some of the bloodier customs of the Roman Catholic Church. Even though clumsily made, the sculpture of two gods grafted onto one another evoked a real sense of evil and betrayal. I think it must seem to some Mexicans that the Spanish failed to halt the Aztec reign of terror — they simply transferred it to new management. Another day, we visited a Cathedral built with silver profits during the colonial period. Our guide, Rigo, pointed to carvings of Aztec gods camouflaged among the Catholic carvings around the sacristy. Since Native Mexicans were responsible for the carvings, one can only assume that the priests were unaware of their slaves' opinions of the relationship between Catholic and Aztec gods.

The most frequent reminder of this culture's consciousness of death can be found in the churches. Michener's opinion is that American and English art and literature portray a people striving toward immortality. Spanish and Mexican literature, on the other hand, he thinks, has its focus much more on final (and often gruesome) death. The Spanish conquerors and Aztecs had a lot in common.... Having lived most of my life in the Midwest whose churches contain sanitized images of a crucified Christ that are more horrible in the abstract than in physical detail, this was rather shocking. The Christ I used to gaze up at during Sunday morning masses had only a single tiny drop of blood on his chest, where the centurions had stabbed him. His crown of thorns lay carefully on an unblemished scalp. Bolts pierced his palms, but his hands were bloodless and relaxed. My eyes were drawn not to his wounds, because these were mostly erased, but to the statue's eyes, which looked sad and tired. How different are the images we saw in Mexican churches! There was one statue, in particular, that portrayed Christ crumpled upon the ground, presum-

ably after his body had been removed from the cross. Several of his bloody ribs are clearly visible within the gaping and torn cavity in his side. That statue suddenly clarified for me the story of "Doubting Thomas," the saint who supposedly expressed skepticism about the tales of Christ's death when they met after Christ's resurrection. According to the New Testament story, Christ supposedly invited Thomas to insert his hand into the wound in his side. Well, Thomas could have plunged *both* his hands into the horrible wound in the statue we saw in that Guanajuatoan church. The thorns on this Christ's head tore deep into his scalp, and blood still poured from its wounds. His hands and feet were a pulpy mess; his skin waxy white in color. The statue might have inspired some of the worst slasher films ever made, it was so horrible to look at. Statues and paintings of this sort were everywhere in Mexican churches.

But then we would walk out of the church to the bright daylight outside, and inevitably we would see a beautiful fountain in a pleasant plaza there in front of the church. There would be masses of flowers and greenery, musicians playing as they strolled along the pathways, little children laughing, chasing one another, and, oh yes, M-16 automatic machine gun-wielding militia patrolling the streets. The contrast between vibrant life and morbid death confronted us everywhere in this city.

Un Día en el Campo

A day in the country. We spent all day Thursday with Rigo and a driver visiting a few small towns and one larger city (San Miguel de Allende) west of Guanajuato. We saw thousands of giant cactus and many beautiful mountain vistas. We roamed through the central plaza and narrow, dusty streets of a very small, poor town near the played-out mine, *Mineral de la Luz*, understanding then, how prosperous Guanajuato was in comparison. We visited several historic sites connected with Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, one of the leaders of the early 19th century Mexican rebellion against Spain. All the major sites of Hidalgo's progress are marked with gigantic, stylized, carved eagle heads. We found one outside a chapel being renovated in a tiny, miserably poor town. Children, crippled old women, and a paraplegic boy in a wheel

chair begged outside the chapel. Before exiting the chapel we searched our pockets for coins. Rigo warned us that if we planned to give money to any of the beggars outside, that we should be sure to give something to all of them. We thanked him for his advice and distributed our coins. I felt sad and uncomfortable afterwards and was eager to leave.

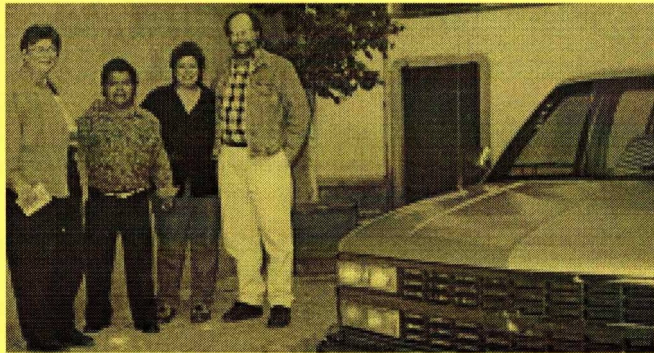
We stopped by the home/studio of an expatriate Australian artist and his Native Mexican wife, and admired his sculptures. Julie ended up buying one of his pieces for her home and arranged to have it shipped to Austin.

From there, we drove to the prosperous, lovely city of San Miguel de Allende, named after another hero of the revolution. Once again, we found a town whose center was a beautiful plaza with statues and a central gazebo and lots of trees and flowers. We ate lunch at a restaurant called "*Pueblo Viejo*" (Old People or perhaps, "Old Fashioned"), where we listened to a musician playing a Peruvian flute and guitar, and gazed at the church where Father Hidalgo's famous ride began. Rigo had given us several lectures on Mexican revolutionary history, and I was growing intrigued by the alliance between intellectuals and agnostic religious leaders. I'm going to have to read more about Mexican history of that time. We strolled through a tile store and admired enameled ceramics. Julie bought a couple small things; Scott and I hesitated but finally decided that traveling with breakables wasn't worth the aggravation.

But the day's highpoint was the long drive back to Guanajuato through the spectacularly gorgeous mountain terrain of the Sierra Madres. Oooo! Aaahh! The terrain reminded me of a very dry version of the most beautiful parts of Colorado. It's hard to say anything more than that. You had to have been there.

Most of Friday remained for us to explore Guanajuato one last time, since our bus back to the U.S. did not leave Leon till later in the evening. We visited the Alfenique Fair in the San Fernando Square,

where vendors sold beautiful, brightly colored almond candies in varied shapes, including skulls, skeletons, skeletons popping out of coffins, etc. in honor of the Day of the Dead. Each vendor had their own table, like at a farmer's market, and they vied for prizes for their wares. Parents trailed af-



Jeanne (with Fodor's), Rigo, Julie, Scott, & the tour van

ter their children who ran from table to table looking for the most wonderful candies.

Posada

A *posada* is a small restaurant, sometimes part of an inn, which specializes in regional dishes. When we weren't exploring the town that week, the three of us spent a lot of time sitting and talking beneath umbrellas in sidewalk cafés, often in front of our own hotel, the *Hotél Posada Santa Fe*. Whenever you sit down in the plazas, you must expect to be approached by freelance merchants selling serapes, blankets, jewelry, candy, portraits-while-you-sit and even hammocks. These merchants are joined by strolling mariaches in the evening and our first night we paid one group of musicians to serenade us at dinner with their guitar, violin, trumpets and song. By the end of the week we recognized most of the sellers in our plaza, the *Jardín Unión*.

Most mornings, Scott and Julie would search for something other than *Café Americano* (which turned out to be Nescafé instant coffee). We discovered several places that served cappuccino and espresso and other good coffees, but I was especially pleased by the *chócolate* served at these places. *Chócolate* (chock-o-LOT) is a rather bitter, hot drink of milk and chocolate, heavy on the cinnamon. I'd never tasted anything quite like it before: it was delicious and perfect in the morning. We'd usually find cafés during the day and order glasses of *agua mineral sin hielo* (mineral water without ice) or *agua mineral sin gas y sin hielo* (mineral water without bubbles or ice — spring water) ... but always, always *sin hielo*, without ice. Because it's true, you shouldn't drink the water in Mexico. It turns out that there are simply no operating waste treatment systems in all of Mexico. Even the enormous metropolis of Mexico City pours all its effluents directly into a river. I doubt that the water is any safer for residents than it is for tourists, though the tourists may react more quickly and dramatically to accidental contact with Mexico's water. It wasn't that difficult to avoid drinking tap water (although I did have to remind Scott one morning to use the bottled water provided by our hotel for brushing his teeth), but it was sad to have to avoid the vast array of fresh fruits available at the restaurants and food carts along the streets. They all looked delectable, but we were



The view from our hotel

reminded by our guidebook that most of the fruit had been rinsed ... with tap water. Ah well. We risked all, however, by twice sampling exotic salsas made with fresh tomatoes, avocados, onions, cilantro and other wonderful ingredients. That may have accounted for Scott's slight case of Montezuma's Revenge, but Julie and I managed to evade repercussions.

Dinners were both delicious and challenging. With our dictionary at hand, we were still stumped for the meaning of certain menu items and once Julie ended up with a meal she disliked. ("That's definitely *not* beef.") Now, when I read a menu with cute names for featured dishes, I feel great sympathy for non-English speaking persons who must try to decipher the decorative descriptions. The vast majority of the restaurants in Guanajuato served the same menu items as all the rest of the restaurants. That is not to say that they weren't served with originality and differences, but our choices were limited in a way that makes me really appreciate my access in the U.S. to a variety of restaurants serving the cuisines of so many world cultures. We did eat at one Italian restaurant on the last night of our visit, and there was actually a Sushi bar in town that we skipped, but for the most part it was tortillas and beans and salsa with everything; food was spicy, but not hot as we've grown used to in Tex-Mex food.

One of the first things we did on Saturday night after returning to Austin was to go out for Thai food.

Hasta Luego

See you later. The bus ride back to Austin was a long one, though the interaction with clerks in the bus stations became a bit easier since I was a little more comfortable asking questions in Spanish. But we were glad to climb into the cab at the Austin bus station (and shocked by the cost of the taxi ride: "Do you know what that is *in pesos?!?*"). Once we got back to Julie's house, we tried to stay up late talking about our trip because Scott and I needed to leave fairly early the next morning and this would be our last chunk of time together. But we were all exhausted and we soon abandoned attempts at conversation and said goodnight.

It had been a wonderful trip. We enjoyed traveling with one another. Conversation was interesting, promoted by the catalyst of strange surroundings and

customs. In spite of the spontaneity of our plans (we frequently referred to “our adventure”) nothing went wrong, our health stayed mostly fine and nothing was stolen or lost until we got back into the U.S. My luggage was temporarily lost by TWA and then I left the Michener novel in the taxi. I had to go to the library on Monday during my lunch hour, just to finish the last couple chapters. After a summer of virtual confinement for Scott and I, the change of scene had been just what we needed. We hope to return someday to explore other parts of Mexico. *Hasta Luego.*

All that’s left now, is to wait for those charge bills to arrive in the mail. *La cuenta, por favor.*

Mailing Comments

© Douglas Barbour

Your comments on the war on drugs reminded me of one of the newest conflagrations growing out of the huge US appetite for illegal drugs — Colombia, of course. This is shaping up to be another nightmarish situation in the history of international trauma. US Armed Forces and the media’s priorities collude to a defacto (if not purposeful) conspiracy that has muffled available information about what’s going on in Colombia. We’ve been supporting the official military for years now against the “rebels,” providing arms and training, but few US citizens know about it. A recent incident in which a US plane was shot down over Colombian mountains killing all aboard, didn’t even hit the front pages of any major US newspaper. Columbia’s military establishment has grown predictably violent toward all Colombian citizens, a law unto itself. (Don’t we learn lessons? Sometimes it seems not.) Meanwhile we’re selling arms to the other side too, and BOTH sides depend upon income from cocaine sales. There don’t seem to be “good guys” on either side, though the worst side may be the US itself, for buying cocaine from Columbia on one hand and supplying arms and training for killing the cocaine-growers on the other....

© Karen Summerly

I wish you much luck and success in getting published. Sounds scary but exciting. Your uncle Roy’s fears that a tape recorder would “disappear” from his room in the convalescent home are probably quite reasonable. From what I’ve read about many homes for the elderly, petty theft by staff and/or fellow patients is a huge problem. A big item like a wheel chair is something else, though —

quite a bit more difficult to palm or pocket, you know. Maybe your Uncle Roy will surprise you if you suggest an electric wheelchair. He might feel that it is less likely to be stolen and — if he thinks it would help him — a reasonable thing to own.

© Kerry Ellis

What a lovely vacation! I’m glad to hear it met your expectations! The rigors of traveling via “companion passes” could easily have overshadowed your enjoyment of your trip. But I think I understand how you maintained such a positive attitude through it all. You knew what it meant to be a stand-by passenger before you embarked on your trip and right from the beginning, you accepted the idea that you would be spending some time waiting around in airports, and considered that an acceptable trade-off for an affordable trip. Scott and I made a similar decision when we decided to take a bus down to Guanajuato Mexico. If we had originally planned to fly and for some reason our flight had been cancelled, I would probably have found the 21-hour bus trip a little less charming than I did in actuality.

I’m wondering if you weren’t really “one of the lucky ones” in your job at the reservations desk at United, but rather, someone who did their job very well and was therefore rewarded with an early transfer to a better job. The same positive attitude that kept you sane and in a good mood, probably made you one of the better agents at United. Take the credit! It’s not always just luck that causes good things in your life. It’s interesting too, how you’ve turned around the lessons you learned as an agent to provide you with ideas of how to respectfully deal with difficult agents when you are the customer.

I don’t think you have anything to apologize for in your contributions to this apa. I find your stories of solo explorations and travel interesting in their own right. I can’t imagine that anyone here would argue that being single is less interesting than being part of a couple, or that being part of a couple is less interesting than being part of an extended family or than any other lifestyle. Each person’s perspective is slightly different than another’s and we all benefit from what we learn and share from other points of view. I try to keep in mind the epiphany I experienced in the year after I broke up with a friend. Dave and I shared an apartment and had been a “couple” for only two years, and yet when we broke up and I moved away to my own apartment, I was shocked by a few things that suddenly fell by the wayside. There were activities

and interests that — before splitting up — I would have sworn were my own interests. Wine, for instance. During those two years I had begun to really enjoy tasting wines and learning about differences among varieties. But only a few months after moving out, I realized that the pleasures of wine for me had been almost totally bound up within the rituals of sharing with my friend. When I stopped tasting wine with Dave, I discovered that I had very little interest in pursuing this hobby on my own. I think it's probably more difficult for a person who lives intimately with another person or persons to be clear in their own mind about what is pleasurable or important to themselves alone. On the other hand, when I lived on my own for 5 years after splitting up with Dave, I think the sense I had of myself, my self-confidence and my self-understanding grew faster and more strong than they had in any other period of my life. That strength, I think, made subsequent relationships stronger and better, but did not (and does not) change my sense that I no longer feel the clarity about my own interests and preferences that I did when I lived alone. Which is not necessarily a bad thing. It's just, as I said, a different and valuable perspective.

You responded to Jane's comment to Lisa, re "The Gift of Fear," with a discussion of the idea that striving for fame is one of the causes of violence in our culture. Susan Faludi gives a lot of support to that idea in her recent book, *Stiffed: the Betrayal of the American Man*. The chapter she devotes to interviews with Spur Posse members is really remarkable for the constantly expressed desire of these guys to become "brand names" no matter what they have to do to achieve the limelight. (I've been recommending this book to friends, although I think there are problems in the way Faludi uses her on-target insights of current, post-WWII culture to explain behaviors and problems that extend much further than post-war United States culture. Still, I found the book fascinating in a very science fictional sort of way for how it got me thinking about the world from a different perspective, not to mention a couple of rather interesting references to science fiction.)

© Guy W. Thomas

Lucy Huntzinger (whose online journal is read by Elizabeth Fox and perhaps others of you here in *Intercourse*) is also looking for a house in the Bay Area. She and her husband, John Bartelt, have been counseled by friends that they should increase their

offer on a house by 1% for every additional offer pending on the house. What a daunting house-buying climate it must be out there, where there is such a scarcity of affordable housing and so many wealthy buyers! Lucy and John, like you, may have found something to their liking that is located rather further south than they prefer. However their "too far south" is Mountain View; and in comparison, (after checking the Rand McNally), your "too far south" appears conveniently within BART commuting distance. And what a find! A house with a ramp already built! I hope things worked out for you in the couple months since the last apa deadline, and that you are already packing your boxes.

I liked *American Beauty* too. Whereas *Eyes Wide Shut* seemed to be about a couple moving unconsciously through society and a relationship, this one seemed to be about someone actually waking up — just in time to die, granted, but nevertheless in time to save his soul.

© Elizabeth Fox

Scott frequently comes home and answers my question about how his day went with the phrase, "boring." Like Pat, it often turns out that he's got lots of interesting stories when I can convince him to talk about it a little more. Scott works for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. A couple days ago I probed a bit, and he told me about the particular set of problem driving records that involve mistaken identities resulting from error or misrepresentation at the time a driving ticket is issued by a police officer. Apparently, it's a pain to get such records straightened out once they get mixed up. (And that was Scott's task that day at work.) I was impressed by how much time might pass before the DOT might finally enforce penalties on a person whose records had become divided. And how penalties might be wrongly imposed on someone whose record was mistakenly merged with another person's record. Scott told me about the time the two twins with the same name and address had to appear together at the DOT in order to prove that there really were two of them. And after a few more questions Scott and I ended up spinning a highly entertaining scam that could succeed based on a knowledge of how this process works. I'm sure that if the people sitting next to us at the Chinese restaurant were eavesdropping, they must have thought that we were cooking up some sort of nefarious plan to cheat the government, and wondered why we found our plans so very amusing.

You wrote about reading about Pete's seizures in Jim's zine and then immediately encountering an advertisement for Tegretol. A weird coincidence like that happened to me just the other day. We were on our way to Iowa for a visit with Scott's family; Scott was driving and I was putting our Mexican photos in order. I had just finished the job and was examining a photo of two Native Mexican miners when I looked up and saw the sign directly in front of us: "Spanish Mines." Very freaky. On all our trips to Iowa, I'd never seen that sign before. We decided to investigate it the next time we drove down to Iowa.

You wrote "I still think that some people display it [the Confederate Flag] without racist meaning, and that they shouldn't have to stop because some people interpret it differently. Doesn't intention count? I have old American Indian jewelry with swastikas on it; should I stop wearing it because the symbol has come to have other meanings?" Here's a newsblurb from *USA Today*. (Another coincidence: it was on my bus seat the morning I happened to read your zine.)

"Contrary to the latest web-spread urban legend, Nazis have not invaded the Pokémon world. Seems some folks are upset that two Japanese-language Pokémon cards have what appears to be a Nazi swastika on them. The red mark, actually a mirror image of a swastika, is a Japanese symbol for good fortune and predates Nazism by centuries. Nintendo says it will issue the same cards in the USA next year — without the symbol."

Apparently, it's good business to respect the fact that the swastika has a history of almost universally accepted evil. For me, personally, I'd have to have some really important, huge reason to wear a swastika in spite of the pain and fear I know that symbol inspires in most people. In fact, I can't imagine a reason big enough or important enough to purposefully insult so many people. The simple fact that the symbol has meant different things in the past, would not be enough for me. The meaning the swastika acquired during WWII has changed its meaning forever, in my mind.

When people ask you why you are wearing a swastika, you probably describe its alternate historical meaning and why you have personally significant reasons for wearing it. But I could easily understand if your explanation was nevertheless interpreted by some people to mean you feel that your reasons outweigh the anger and fear that symbol cause and were therefore offended. In the case of the swastika

and the Confederate flag, the offensive meanings are nearly universally assumed to be the only meanings. You couldn't possibly go through this explanation for everyone who sees (and flinches from) those symbols. I hear you to be saying, basically, that you don't care about anyone else's reaction — that it's their responsibility to consider the possibility that you might be using those symbols in a different way from the way most people interpret them.

Words are symbols too. I may decide to use the word "fuck" according to some archaic, non-offensive definition of the word (if there is one. I'm just being hypothetical here.). But if I did so, I should also be prepared for (and sympathetic towards those) who are offended by my use of that word in their company.

You can display the Confederate flag. It's obviously your constitutional right to do so. Similarly it is your constitutional right to wear a piece of jewelry with a swastika on it. But, given the overwhelming mass of opinion about what those symbols mean, you should also accept the fact that people will be offended, even after you explain to them why your interpretation of those symbols is not offensive.

"My boyfriend. My girlfriend." I'm in the minority on this, I know, in finding these phrases uncomfortable. I'm certainly not trying to start a campaign to get people to stop using them. I was just explaining why I personally don't like using the phrases. "My father, my mother," or "my child," all feel like descriptions of organic relationships. "My girlfriend" sounds different to me; it sounds like "my BMW," or "my Mac G4" — proud possessions that can be purchased, won, and, in the end, discarded. No matter what the quality of the relationship, the constant connection to "my mother" or "my father," endures. But the "my" in "my girlfriend" defines the quality of that relationship. (If it goes bad, there is no longer any "my girlfriend.") I guess I just don't like the idea of a person's role being defined as a sort of acquisition.

When can stories of a non-existent child be classified as non-fiction? When the non-existent child is one's inner child.

© Art Widner

Ah, I misunderstood! You're fomenting phonetic revolution! Well, then maybe you should go back to the defense of your ideals. It sounds like an uphill struggle, though. It was and is hard enough to get people to accept little changes to the language. The addition of the word "Ms," which replaced no other word, but simply created a new

word to fill a need to name a concept that already existed, was resisted and scorned for years. The attempt to restore the plural generic pronoun, they/ them, to a generic singular usage, still lacks full acceptance. These are battles I've joined. But you're trying to change the spelling of ALL English words! Whew. You're right, I'm not willing to throw out the investment I have in the English language as it is. Actually, I should be one of your apostles, since my grasp on spelling isn't actually all that strong; I'm one of the worst spellers I know. My investment is actually bound up with the READING of the English language. I can read very fast. I gobble books fast and have a fairly high retention level. I would really really hate it if everyone started spelling words differently, the way THEY thought the words should be spelled with the alphabet as THEY believed the letters should be used, based on the way THEY pronounced the words. This would slow down my reading rate considerably. I don't read as much as I want to read in spite of my speedy rate; I'd slog down to a tiny percentage of that rate if suddenly correct spelling were based on each individual's pronunciation. I'd have to read each word, and sometimes stop to puzzle out the meaning of individual words. No more scanning whole pages in a few moments. Very bad grammar or illegible text quickly frustrates me for the same reason. I tend to toss it aside if it takes too much work simply to identify words. Sorry.

© Lyn Paleo

What an excellent, powerful zine, Lyn. Thank you. Have you just recently organized your thoughts about your mother, following her death, or was this essay the result of a gradual, lifetime learning project? I admire the way you've faced the similarities and differences between your mother and yourself, and developed healthy ways of dealing with corresponding aspects in your own personality.

© Donya Hazard White

Tough grace? I guess that works for me. My understanding of the word, "grace," as an ex-Catholic, is that it is a kind of spiritual strength earned by good works and thoughts. (The part I've discarded from my early Catholic training, is that grace operates on some sort of "points" system, whereby the more points you have, the better chance you have of getting into heaven and once there, the better place you earn within its hierarchy.) Translated

into secular terms, I understand grace to be character strength, integrity, and personal honor, all nurtured by doing the right thing no matter what the cost. The higher the cost, the tougher the grace earned.

Good for you for deciding to do the early cancer detection test. Sounds like an opportunity to earn some tough grace.

My sister, Julie, traveled in Turkey last year, and found it an uncomfortable place in which to be a single woman traveling. She's a strong, competent woman; she traveled around the world on her own, spending most of three months in countries where she didn't know the language and where she had made no advance reservations or plans. For the most part, she was wildly enthusiastic about her experiences. But she cut her trip short in Turkey because she became frightened by the way she was treated there by men on the street. Knowing how usually fearless she is, her stories about Turkey have exaggerated in my mind the potential dangers of that country, and I wonder how you feel about being a woman visiting there.

© Arthur Hlavaty

Some of the things I know prisoners are doing: cutting and finishing lumber products in the employ of private industry, farm work previously performed by migrant laborers, making gloves in an off-campus factory for sale by a for-profit company, taking telephone orders and reservations for private companies, and of course, the old stand-by, making license plates. This year, the private Wisconsin company that makes those plates with prison labor lobbied the Wisconsin legislature to require that the license plate design be changed each year. (Right now, the design gets changed irregularly, every 10 years or so.) Of course, a complete re-design of the license plates will require Wisconsin citizens to replace their plates every year, rather than simply sticking a renewal stamp onto their plates. And it will involve greater costs and more importantly, greater profits for the company. A couple weeks ago, legislation was introduced to require annual redesign of the license plate. The fact that the state will share in the profits (because the company will pay Wisconsin for use of prison labor), will no doubt be considered by the legislators deciding this matter.

All this talk about the difference between "gray" and "grey" had me worried that I had misspelled my zine title. That's quite possible, of course. But as soon as someone voiced their opinion that "gray" and

“grey” referred to two different colors, my mind supplied the image of a cool color (with more blue in it) for gray, and a warm color (with more red in it) for grey. Now, I’ll never be sure I’m spelling this word correctly. Both words are going to be attached to images. That’s how I get in trouble with spelling.

Re your comment to Doug about how our hopes for a president with integrity were dashed by Clinton’s behavior in office.... Scott and I have been enjoying the new TV show, *West Wing*. It’s about the only show this season we go out of our way to watch. *West Wing* is extremely well written and more complex than TV shows usually are around the topic of politics. I’d recommend it for that alone, but I think its main appeal is its wish-fulfillment element. The show fantasizes about a current administration that might have been if Clinton had turned out to be more like we hoped.

© Debbie Notkin

This has been a zine of coincidences. Immediately after I read the bad news about Sheila’s health, I glanced at the newspaper on our dining room table and saw a headline about the growing percentage of deaths being attributed to so-called medical “mistakes.” Most of the article had to do with mis-transcriptions of drug prescriptions — involving wrong dosages, misspelled drug names, and that sort of thing. But it’s a scary thing and a horrific thing when the mistake is lethal in the case of ... the doctor’s sloppiness? ... Inattentiveness? ... Cost cutting issues? If I were you, I’d be torn by Sheila’s desire to avoid litigation and my own desire to find some way to make that doctor pay for his mistake.... Hang in there.

I’m real glad there are some good things going on in your life too, that allow you to say, “Things could be a lot worse.” Your health news all sounds good, and I hope your weekend with Matthew, Anne, Michael and Jane was joyful. The erotic crush sounds like a lovely thing. Good luck with that!

I don’t think my mother felt she had been trapped in a parental-care role when her siblings moved to other states. In fact, she rejected the chance for an adventurous life outside Wisconsin, long before any of her sisters or brother left the state. Mom graduated from high school at the beginning of WWII and immediately accepted a job offer at the Pentagon as a typist/secretary. The shortage of office workers was so great, they were willing to fly young women out to Washington D.C. and provide them with housing and excellent salaries. But she got homesick. Aunt Char-

lotte told me that when mom’s letters arrived, Grandma would read her pitiful, sad notes aloud, pointing out the tearstains on the stationary. Finally, grandpa agreed to pay for her return ticket home and also repay the original plane ticket price to the government. (The deal was that the government would provide transportation only if the person stayed on the job for a minimum of three months.) When her brother and sisters left, Mom felt abandoned by her siblings, I think, and nurtured an anger toward them that continued for decades. She was never shy about expressing her anger to us kids about how they’d “broken up” her family; she’d always urge us to be different. My grandparents got over it much faster than Mom did (if in fact they were at all upset in the same way); they soon began taking annual trips to California to visit their far-flung family. Mom finally visited for the first time more than 12 years after Charlotte, Donna and Ronny left. Furthermore, neither of my grandparents needed extra care for 30 years after my aunts and uncles left the state. Grandpa helped Dad build our house. Grandma babysat for us kids often; they also gave my folks financial assistance for a while. It’s my opinion that Mom neither understands nor sympathizes with someone (especially a family member) who puts physical proximity to family at a lower priority to any other aspect of their life. Mom’s anger at me when I left for college and failed to exhibit homesickness lasted for years. She still inflicts monstrous guilt trips on Julie for failing to visit frequently and offers weird criticisms when Julie talks about her travels or career.

At the root of all this, I think, is a basic fear or dislike of travel and change. Mom’s just a little more strong-willed than most people in assuming that her dislikes and philosophies are (or should be) shared by everyone else. In the years after my Dad was promoted to Designer Engineer/Salesman at Mead Containers, he got involved in lots of junket travel, for the purpose of wining and dining customers. Every year the top salespeople would take trips to exotic parts of the world and take along some of their best clients. Mom raged at Dad for going on these cool vacations without her, and Dad felt bad about it. So he quietly began campaigning among his fellow salesmen and bosses and clients to include wives on the next trip. I understand that this was a very unpopular idea and that Dad had to use up a lot of points to make this happen. I remember when he came home, grinning ear to ear with the news that the spring trip to the Bahamas would be a trip on which mom could accompany him. He was just bursting with the news and we all looked at mom, expecting her to laugh and smile at

the idea of such a wonderful vacation. Mom didn't smile at all. She got up from the kitchen table and walked over to the calendar inside the pantry door. She paged through to May and then said, "Sorry I won't be able to go with you, I've got a bowling night that weekend." We were all stunned. Dad walked out of the house without saying a word and was gone for several hours. Mom stopped complaining about his trips. It was as if Dad had called her bluff. We realized that she'd never actually been upset about not going herself, only that Dad went.

Like Lyn, I can see elements of my mom's behavior in myself. For instance, as Scott and I get closer to a planned trip, I will often start thinking about how much I'd rather stay home and "get stuff done." I almost always push through that by remembering that in the past, my misgivings have almost always gone away once I've arrived. And certainly I lack the extreme fear that mom must have around travel and change. Not so much as Julie lacks it, but I'm fairly confident compared to Mom. Still, it's interesting to feel the shape of the feelings I suspect Mom has, in my own head.

Yes, my mother does know that I skipped out of Charm School. I told the story at a Thanksgiving meal many years ago, with the whole family listening. Mom got swept up in the general laughter and has even said she's glad that my activity of choice at the time was to visit a library rather than go to a bar or something like that.

You asked Karen, "Are there any companies that 'more or less have their act together?' from inside, that is." This reminded me of a book review I just read that warned against so-called "Cult companies," that supposedly earn employee loyalty by encouraging them to "feel part of the team," not to mention the fact that they provide benefits ranging from on-site child care and a fitness center to dry cleaning. Southwest Air and Mary Kay Inc. are cited by author, Dave Arnott as being successful as a result of their reputation for being cultures of fun and devoted employees. His thesis is that "it's easier to become "encultured" in a job one loves. "The problem is that we fail to develop as individuals, Arnott says, and instead define ourselves on what we do rather than who we are." Ironically, Faludi in *Stiffed*, cites the exact reverse of this process as one of the main sources of gender problems in the U.S. She sees problems inherent in our culture's encouragement of people to seek to become "star" individuals and to withdraw from community. She believes people are more healthy to the degree they understand their lives to be part of a larger effort, that

they are part of a team whose leadership respects and honors their contributions and which offers loyalty in return for loyalty. Arnott, I think, would see such a goal as some sort of malaise and he uses *ad hominem* language to define such ideals as inherently evil. "Cults," indeed. Most people would opt for a job anytime if it would mean a respectful employer, humane benefits and a sense of security. What makes that like a cult?

It's getting pretty weird in this country when companies that show respect toward their workers and offer them better-than-average benefits, cause right wing economic commentators to label them "cults." Arnott's book, by the way, is *Corporate Cults: The Insidious Lure of the All-Consuming Organization*, American Management Association.

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I like what you said about Diane's skills: "...great at making processes work that provide quality data, especially if she's doing the work that keeps the quality high." I feel that way about myself sometimes, not that I produce quality data, but that I'm better at creating quality work myself than at helping others create quality work. I've had opportunities to move up the hierarchy here at the DNR, but all those moves would involve not being an artist anymore. I might start out supervising artists, but the further I wanted to move up the ladder, the more removed I would become from the work that actually interests me and from my actual skills.

I admired the way — specifically the timing of how — you dealt with the recent situation with Ariel. In spite of the impatience you and Diane were feeling, you allowed the rest of the day for Ariel (and you two) to do a bit of introspection about what she'd said and done. Then you allowed another day for counseling and more time for her to think about why it had happened and what it meant. Only on the next day did you discuss the consequences of her behavior. I remember times when I was a kid when I misbehaved (or didn't) and was reprimanded. It all happened within moments, usually, of the actual offence. And if Mom or Dad were really angry when it happened, a not uncommon situation, they'd often say something that got tangled up in my mind with the situation itself. We'd have arguments afterward, not about what I'd done but about the scene that had followed. I really do admire the clarity and strength of your and Diane's behavior in this respect. After all, a kid is not like a pet, which is supposed to have its nose rubbed

in its mess immediately to be sure they connect their bad behavior with the punishment....

☉ Weather

Something is Wrong. It's no good anymore, talking about what is "usual" weather for this time of year, because for the past 10 years or so, all the usual expectations have been blown away. Nevertheless, the last five years of Unusual Winter Weather have followed a kind of pattern. We've had a period of real cold — 0°F temperatures or below — for a week or so, usually somewhere between mid-November and early December. That's followed by what feels like a miraculous return to fall, and even though it is really too late for "Indian Summer," that's what we called the December balmy weather. (Indian Summer is technically a series of warm days following the first freeze.) Then, it's back to bitterly cold weather, dangerously cold weather, the kind that makes anything over 0°F feel like a heat wave. The Unusual Winter Weather pattern again kicks in by late January or early February, with a too-early return to Spring weather. I'm wondering now if we're going to have anything resembling a real Wisconsin winter, even an Unusual Wisconsin Winter. Here it is early December and we still haven't had Indian Summer yet because we haven't gone below freezing in the daytime. There have been a handful of nights where we've gone a couple degrees below 32°F, but not so far that plants couldn't have been protected with a piece of plastic laid over them. This, our warmest November on record, has stayed in the 60s or high 50s mainly, with dips down into the 40s, and it's continuing on in that range this month. That's just plain ridiculous for December. I killed a mosquito yesterday! The lakes aren't even THINKING of freezing over. I saw a momma duck leading a line of baby ducks across the street the other day! We're saving lots of money on heating bills, but it's starting to feel less like a delightful aberration and more like an ominous event.

The week's forecast calls for temperatures dipping down into the 20s in a couple days. There's even a chance of snow, which will be the first snowfall of the season. Maybe things will feel a little bit more normal soon....

☉ Just for Show

Last week we stayed overnight at Scott's Dad's house. Just before we turned in for the night, Butch hurried into the bathroom to put towels out for us and apologized for almost forgetting. Margaret, he explained, had put out the "good" towels for our visit, but had forgotten to put out towels for our actual use....

I've grown used to this concept "just for show," or "for good," or "for guests." I've grown up with it. We used to have two sets of dishes, one for everyday and one for good, or for guests. We had everyday stainless silver utensils and the "good" silverware (which was really just prettier stainless steel). We had everyday towels and guest towels. Regardless of the fact that I've grown used to it, I resist the custom in my own house. I want to use the thick, fluffy towels myself. I want to enjoy the look of the towels that actually match the color scheme of the bathroom myself. I don't want to wait for guests to enjoy the attractive place settings, and so I've argued against the idea of buying different sets of belongings — one for real, for everyday, for us — and one for good, for guests.... But I was amazed at Butch's corollary. Not only did he have "good" towels, but they were NEVER to be used, they were for show only.

And that got me thinking about something I wrote about in the last issue of *Grayscale*. Front yards in American communities have a lot in common with "for-guests-only" towels. Front yards are fixed up, kept up and designed for viewing of others, less for our own use. People who plant vegetable gardens in their front yards are viewed in most communities as kind of weird. In some communities they would be fined for such weirdness.

Is this a kind of schizophrenia? (Not to say that it's not a justified schizophrenia, a means to create private space in a too-public and un-safe world.) Do we spend too much time presenting fake images of ourselves through front yard masks on our homes and special belongings that present us as people who own certain things (but who normally don't use these things). Do we do this in more personal ways with the clothes we wear and behaviors?

—Jeanne Gomoll