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The Many Faces of Mexico

By Joy Birnbach Dunstan

Back in the U.S., my specialty as a psychotherapist was working with what is commonly known as multiple personality disorder. Maybe that's why I feel so at home here in Mexico, land of so many distinctive faces and personalities. Mexico is sophisticated and naïve, ultra-modern and backward, frenzied and laidback, wealthy and poverty-stricken. Just when I think I'm getting to know what Mexico is like, I meet a whole new side of her to challenge the image I'd held.

Geographically, she's a harsh barren desert, a fertile valley, a lush tropical jungle, and a magnificent beach. She's so parched and dry the air is hazy with dust, and then she's drenched with rains that overflow city curbs and occasionally entire villages. Parts of her rest languidly at sea level while other parts perch more than a mile high above the clouds. She's bone-dry and suffocatingly humid, she's icy-cold and scorchingly hot, sometimes all in the same day.

More than just her physical attributes make this a country of contrasts. Mexico's people and cultures are as diverse as her land. I'm continually fascinated as I meet yet another new part of her. Unlike the U.S. that prides itself on being a melting pot, Mexico is proud of its diversity and makes fewer attempts to homogenize. As a teenager I moved with my family from New York to California. It was fun to wear clothing in styles that had not yet migrated from east to west. Today, however, with the advent of shopping malls and corporate mergers, you can buy something on one coast and return it to the same store on the other. Strip malls and chain stores have

transported local specialties into standardized inventory. Local color has faded to beige.

Mass merchandising is definitely on its way here in Mexico as well, but for now it's still possible to find local treasures and distinctive environments. Santa Clara has its copper, Oaxaca has its black pottery, Paracho its guitars. Age-old crafts continue to be passed down to new generations of family members in villages specializing in their own particular art forms. Individual families have their distinctive styles that mark a piece as theirs alone. Several years ago in Zijuatenejo, I was taught how a clay roof tile can be traced to its maker by the size and shape of its curve since they are formed by bending the soft clay over the thigh of its maker. Do you suppose the tiles of the heftiest artisans are sought after because their breadth saves money by necessitating fewer tiles?

In the U.S. pretty much everyone speaks English. While Spanish is certainly the predominant language of Mexico, there are 62 indigenous languages still in active use today, each surrounded by its own heritage and culture. Mexico is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world today. Many of the indigenous people have retained their own language and speak Spanish as a second language, if at all. On a recent trip to Quintana Roo in the Yucatan, I was surprised at how many locals I met who speak Mayan as their primary language, retaining a proud sense of their noble heritage while raising their children in this rapidly changing world. There are around 1½ million speakers of Mayan in Mexico today. I wondered about concepts like genetic memory and collective unconscious as I watched Maya workers pushing wheelbarrows at the Tulum ruins. Do they feel a sense of kinship with their ancestors who built those ancient temples

and pyramids? Are the secrets of the Mayas imprinted somewhere deep in their psyches?

Even the Mexican government has a hand in maintaining different Mexicos. Over the years, *Fonatur*, Mexico's national trust fund for tourist development, has poured money into developing several coastal areas as mega-resorts, cleverly bringing in huge sums of tourist money while keeping the hoards of tourists tidily in their designated places. Cancun, Ixtapa, Cabo, and several other resorts offer the comforts of home to vacationers seeking sunshine and surf with a foreign accent. My maid would be overwhelmed should she find herself suddenly in one of these strange places. Having never been beyond Guadalajara, this face of Mexico would be as foreign to her as a trip to Kansas.

Coastal towns away from the resorts are my favorite face of Mexico. Time moves slowly at the beach, and the sign announcing the lone internet café is the only testament to the arrival of the 21st century. Sleepy, laidback, and dusty, fishing villages offer a tranquil beauty that has little in common with the resorts aside from the sound of surf.

A few hours' drive and a world away are the colonial towns that make up so much of Mexico's interior. While architecture is not a word that even applies to most coastal construction, the architecture, reminiscent of its European roots, to be found in the interior villages and cities is world renowned for its style and grace. The cries of the revolutionaries still ring loudly as you walk down the cobbled streets of colonial Mexico.

So many personalities, so many faces, even so many languages, yet there is one voice common throughout all of Mexico. Whether the backdrop is a cathedral spire, a bustling marketplace, a fishing boat,

or a Maya ruin, the crow of the rooster can be heard everywhere in the country. You may find his raucous cry to be amusing, soothing, or irritating, but nothing says Mexico more than the ubiquitous rooster.

I've met so many Mexicos in my time here, and I have no idea how many more are awaiting introduction. No single one of them can lay claim to being the "real" Mexico. Each is an integral part of the whole. Yet so far, wherever I go and with all the faces I've seen, the face of Lakeside is always the one that welcomes me home with the brightest smile and most melodious roosters.

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