

“*Un Poco del Profundo: A glimpse into deep Mexico*”

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July, 2010

One of the very first things to hit you in the working class neighborhood of Azteca, Mexico is the distinct array of sensory details—the around-the-clock sounds (music in the streets, car horns, bird songs, dog barks, broken mufflers, chirping crickets, whistling iguanas, parties happening in the distant, kids’ playful hollers on the corner, and neighbor’s conversations behind paper thin walls); the smells (the chamomile, freesias, plumeria, mango, guayaba and lemon trees, and fragrance of the coming rain), the textures (the buildings and streets that move seamlessly between brick, stone, tile, dirt, wood, clay, cinderblock and concrete), and the insects (the array of scorpions, spiders, mosquitoes, flies and cicadas trying to find their place within the increasing urbanization of this rural area). And then there are the people—short and brown; casual, intimate and undemanding; kisses to say hello and goodbye. As a visiting American it feels at once warm and comfortable, awkward and unfamiliar. On day one I can slowly feel the tiring, clumsy, and welcomed transition occurring within as I begin to release the worries, pace, culture and comfort zone of my home and ease into the rhythm and realities of this land.

Yet it was in my first *temazcal* (Mexican sweat lodge) that I could literally feel Los Angeles fall away from my body with each drop of sweat. LA is quite heavy and it took a lot of sweating, singing, praying, deep breathing, and some weeping besides the hot rocks inside this small womb-like adobe cave in order to release all that stress. And then it was as if I had fully arrived, and with remnants of aloe leaves and dirt still clinging to my warm, sticky body, I sat under the *palapa* (outdoor bamboo hut), drank my tea brewed with herbs from the garden, and eased into the knowing that I had truly come home to myself.

If the *temazcal* served as the vehicle to ground my spirit, it was a visit to *el Mercado* the next day that acted as my cultural interlocker. Ah, the “people’s market” of Cuernavaca—the very place the elitist mestizo teacher I had in a program here years before told me I should never go for fear of certain mugging—the three story maze that is the glorious center of commerce where anything you want is available for just a few pesos. Want socks? Wrenches? *Yerba Buena* (Peppermint)? Pig’s head? Underware? *Nopal* (Cactus)? Dishware? Fruit? Shoes? Toys? It’s all there. And, no, we didn’t get robbed, only bumped into by old *abuelitas* (grandmothers) who were busy jostling for space in the tiny aisles as they bargained for their weekly purchases. We had brief and friendly interactions with a wide variety of vendors—most of whose businesses in each small stall are generations old and who successfully fought the recent attempt of a large supermarket to out-buy the entire enterprise. This immersion in the market place provided one of the most educational experiences about issues ranging from purchasing power, needs, and trends, local customs and relationships, and the cultural values embedded in commerce.

While Cuernavaca's *mercado* was indeed culturally distinct, deep cultural immersions in markets, restaurants, community centers, schools, dance halls and homes of *the people* are not foreign experiences for me. Throughout my life I have been fortunate enough to have had various opportunities for deep community engagement through traveling, studying, and living abroad in highly developed and barely developed nations and villages in the Americas, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe<sup>1</sup>. I have also spent many years studying and teaching various aspects of intercultural relations. Nonetheless, every time I come to a new place (or even back to a known place, as is the case now) I re-learn and remember so many vital lessons about both the distinctness and the interconnectedness of our histories, cultures and actions.

Seeing it anew like this allows me to further connect with my students, the seven freshman that I had arranged to join me here for a month-long summer school program, many of whom would be seeing Mexico for the first time. I hoped that through their immersion in a local situation in this foreign location, they too could find a way to be at once totally present to the cultural life they would encounter, while also contextualizing this experience within a greater understanding of the many global influences impacting it. I believe that the full extent of any such program can only be realized when the learning turns to action in community partnerships (overturning trends of superficial tourist visits and initiating deeper relationships of reciprocity), allowing for assumptions to be deconstructed as the students open their eyes to see and understand at a deeper level the reality of the others around them. True to all my hopes, throughout this month-long program I saw misconceptions unravel before my eyes at an unprecedented pace and depth.

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Despite warnings of violence in Mexico that nearly cancelled our entire program, my seven freshman arrived safely and soundly for their month-long community engagement program. They were all adolescent chatter and jumbled nerves, giggling and using facebook abbreviated slang words I couldn't even recognize to express their immense excitement of finally arriving to this new world. I knew it would take many sweats and long walks through the market place to ground their energy in this place but I trusted they would dive in deep in just a matter of time.

I had seen them adjust to new ways of thinking about and acting in the world during our previous semester's course of this two-pronged "local-global paired course program." After completing a semester with me at Pitzer College studying native healing traditions and alternative practices for creating personal and social transformation, these same students and I took the ONT 110, "Healing Ourselves and Healing Our Communities" course on the road to engage the same topics but in a different global circumstance (in Temixco, Mexico). In Los Angeles, the students had complemented their theoretical readings and experiential activities with participation in internships and mentorships with local urban Native Americans of the Costanoan Rusmen Carmel Tribe and the San

Gabrieleno Tongva Tribe. Their concepts of social justice and community building had already undergone a hefty paradigm shift that semester as they were introduced to the role of healing and “other ways of knowing” in these distinct communities.

Here they would continue this same arena of study but concentrate on native Mexican healing traditions under the guidance of our guest teacher and program coordinator, a *curandera* (healer)/lawyer/community peace activist powerhouse of a woman named Estela Roman. Unlike many of the typical Spanish-language and cultural immersion programs that are famously offered in Cuernavaca to thousands of visiting Americans each year, our program in Temixco (a mere 25 minutes away from Cuernavaca) was very different in intent, design, and location. Firstly, simply putting the word “healing” into an academic course indicated our attempt to take a path less followed in discussions of globalization and social justice and make visible our belief that we must nurture our spirits and our hearts as well as (or perhaps *in order to*) feed our intellectual and social activist efforts. Secondly, locating our program within a poor/working class neighborhood rarely frequented by *heuros* (white folks) instead of the popular tourist-attraction of Cuernavaca demonstrated our desire to embed our students in the lives of “the people” in order to see and truly get to know the Mexico not typically depicted on postcards. Lastly, our incorporation of the community as leaders/hosts in our program’s social service, guest speaker, and homestay components illustrated our desire to recognize the voices of typically marginalized knowledge producers and demonstrate our social responsibility in engaging in a reciprocal relationship with the community that opened its arms to us with such kindness. Thanks to the program coordinator’s lifetime of community involvement in Temixco (her hometown), the students were welcomed into a web of established relationships of trust and mutual respect, which invariably led to opportunities for deep engagement and cultural immersion.

The program aimed to be multi-faceted in its approach and concentrations. In addition to classes and readings on the Mesoamerican philosophies surrounding illness and wellness, the interconnection of mind-body-heart-spirit and the cosmologies that drive various practices of healing, the students would participate in experiential activities such as sweat lodges, energetic healing massages, ceremonies for “limpias” (emotional and spiritual cleansing) and the creation of herbal tinctures with local medicinal plants. With twenty years of experience in this field, Estela would be the primary teacher of this aspect of the program, with guest *curanderos* contributing with weekly lectures, as well. Additionally, students would have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the community through homestays with local families, six-hour weekly social service internships, and daily Spanish-language courses. Finally, my weekly seminars with them would aim to situate their understanding of local knowledge and culture within a global context, recognizing the effects of globalization (and resulting anti-globalization movements) in perpetuating both a degrading and a valuing of these native healing practices. I hoped to help them link their local community engagement experiences in both Los Angeles and Temixco within an understanding of the impact global restructuring has on indigenous communities, indigenous knowledge and social/ cultural/ ecological justice in these urban/ developed

and semi-rural/ under-developed locations. And, finally, as young, self-identified social justice activists I also wanted these students to expand their notions of social responsibility and community knowledge within a framework of self-knowledge and personal transformation. It was a tall order for a four-week program and needless to say the days proved to be long and full, with learning occurring in multiple settings and on multiple levels. Despite our high aspirations, we were able to begin a deep process of cultural exchange, understanding and contextualization during the month; like that first sweat, the learning in this program proved to be demanding and deeply transformational.

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On the first day of our program, we conducted an opening ceremony in the garden of Estela's house with the host families and the students to give thanks, to open the space, and to request permission and blessings to initiate our program. We were smudged in *copal* (ceremonial incense resin) and said a prayer in each of the four directions (in an indigenous language of our Chiapas guests and in Spanish). Then we all shared in a good meal of *pan dulce* (sweet bread), fruit, yogurt and tea. While the prayers weren't particularly religious in nature, they did indeed recognize the need to ask permission from the land and the ancestors (as equal participants in our shared experience) that we might successfully engage in a nurturing exchange of conversation, learning and culture. It also bound us together in recognizing that a spiritual ceremony was as important as, or perhaps even a necessary precedent to, our ability to learn and grow and give and take from one another in this academic program. This was a first for many in the circle—not only the students who are used to rigid separation of spirit-related matters from academic programs but also for some of the residents who had long abandoned such traditions of their ancestors. Yet, it seemed as though everyone welcomed the new way of coming together, meeting each other, and consciously putting forward our collective intentions for a success program.

Our second method for grounding the students in an understanding of this place was through a presentation by Ross Gandy (a professor from the University of Mexico) on the economic history of Mexico. As important as the ceremony was in offering the students a traditional introduction to the land and people, this experience gave them another context in which to understand the poverty, lifestyles and cultural practices they would soon be a part of in this neighborhood. It was in this 1.5 hour lecture that we learned more about the structure of the country and the implications of development on its inhabitants than we had ever been taught, not only about Mexico but about the U.S., as well<sup>ii</sup>. It's astonishing how little most Americans know about the entangled economic history of our own and our neighboring country, and about the extreme social repercussions that high-end business deals have had on the majority of the country's poor and working class. That majority is currently at 70%—that is SEVENTY percent of the population here lives under the poverty line, 20% are middle class (the majority reside at the lower end of that scale, with a teacher, for example, earning the equivalent of \$600/week), and 10% are the

super rich (who own the television, newspaper, and agricultural businesses, who are the senators and presidents, and whose practices of self-serving legislation and corruption ensure that no one representing “the people” has made it into office since Lazaro Cardenas was President in the 1930’s)<sup>iii</sup>. In Temixco, we were living in a neighborhood amongst the 70% (with some students staying in houses of the lower 20%) and found ourselves lucky not to be among the 4 million in Mexico who cannot afford a toilet, nor among the majority who can’t afford the all-too-expensive toilet paper.

The vast privileges that most in the U.S. enjoy daily, from access to clean water to a sanitary way to go to the bathroom, from government-cleaned streets, from the ability to find work or to drink the water in your home, to the ability to harvest and sell your crops in your own country (a luxury that two-thirds of Mexican peasants cannot afford to do now, under the reign of free trade), are simply inaccessible for the majority of people here. And in these issues, you don’t have to look very far to find the direct kick-backs afforded to wealthy individuals and corporations, many of whom are from the United States. For example, instead of directly addressing the fact that half of the water in Mexico is highly polluted, in 1951 U.S. soft drink companies were invited to invest in Mexico’s cheap sugar to make soda—this solution for the lack of good water for people to drink resulted in enormously successful business for 34 different kinds of soda companies (33 of which are U.S.-based companies, with Coke being the leading one). Coke is now a staple part of the daily diet of almost every Mexican; Mexicans, by the way, have a genetic disposition toward diabetes and since the soda-ization of Mexico, 1 in every 3 Mexicans now suffers from diabetes and diabetes is now the leading cause of death. So far neither Coca-Cola nor the Mexican ministry of health have done anything to help the population address or overturn this epidemic.

This is just one example of a much larger issue related to the ways in which the globalized economy has impacted nations such as Mexico over the last half century. Spurred by the notion that a deregulated, privatized, global free trade regime would provide a panacea of economic growth, nations have willingly suspended laws that previously ensured democratic control, environmental regulations, human rights standards, and processes of self-determination in exchange for free reign of the imperialist ambitions of foreign investment. As a result, transnational corporations, economic networks and free trade agreements such as NAFTA, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, Free Trade Areas of the Americas, and the G8 have forwarded international trends to privatize every aspect of life and the transform every activity and value into a commodity. Consequently, in every corner of the “under-developed world” we have seen catastrophic efforts to privatize education, healthcare, natural resources and human rights; to commodify water, labor rights, genes, and seeds; and to commeralize public spaces and population needs. A web of political, economic and military systems representing entrenched and often invisible interests in the global market have tapped easily into markets (often of the poor and indigenous), such as the Coke example above, without concern for exploitation of the environment, of people and of community rights to clean air, water, food, land and commons<sup>iv</sup>. The initial aims to bring

greater wealth to the citizens of these nations has floundered so completely that in repeated instances around the globe we can see under-developed nations diving deeper in debt to the World Trade Organization while transnational corporations report rapidly increasing profit gains<sup>v</sup>.

Luckily, a growing “movement of movements” (Klein, N., 2004) constituting a web like structure of local movements in solidarity for global causes have created non-hierarchical, self-determined, autonomous, grass-roots movements aimed at reclaiming the commons and re-negotiating the terms of people to market and capital, and to relationships and policies that impact their land, resources, culture and democratic participation. These groups aim to put power in the hands of the local community and to foment a long-term and sustainable respect for diversity (in regards to culture, environment/ biodiversity, politics, and epistemologies) instead of the boundless drive for short-term profits that free trade promotes. Creating a world wherein many worlds fit (to recall the now famous mantra of the 1994 *Zapatista* uprising), distinct local efforts are being implemented globally so that indigenous communities, human rights, the environment and local markets are not exploited or decimated entirely as a result of globalization. While such anti-globalization movements have emerged in Mexico and the rest of the Americas (not to mention the rest of the world) increasingly over the last twenty years, the problems caused by trends of the transnational globalized economy remain an imminent threat for many<sup>vi</sup>.

As we examine these root conditions (historical and current) that have led to the need for social services, desperate migration across the border in search of work, and the poor conditions of living that people have to tolerate and attempt to survive here daily, it not only enables our greater knowing of the place we are in and the coping strategies we witness but it also alerts us to how and why we are able to afford the many luxuries we have in the U.S. These realizations are ones that most Americans have surely read about and thought about in the past but the distance intellectual analysis enables is far different than the act of being in it and bearing witness to these problems in every sensory way. This is at once totally depressing and profoundly important. It helps deepen our sense of awareness regarding our role as U.S. Americans on the micro and macro levels as well as our deepening understanding of the inner workings underlying the social and cultural worlds our group was a part of for our month here. It helps explain and bind us to the many folks who engage in the “informal” (underground) economy), making and selling things from their homes or in the street—the woman who comes by each morning to sell fresh *masa* (the cornmeal which we massage, press, and cook into tortillas each day), the young Indian who comes each day to come clean the patios and make the fires for our tortilla grill and *temazcal*, or the houses that are converted into corner stores on every street to sell cheap imported goods. It heightens our appreciation and understanding of the deep sense of community and traditional practices we are immersed in. It further explains the depth of interdependence and mutual assistance that is ingrained in the life of the household and the neighborhood, for survival relies heavily on this tradition. The deep commitment to collective contribution and social responsibility isn't a forced

obligation, a wise moral choice or a sophisticated level of civic participation but rather an inherent aspect of living and surviving here—like eating, people clean, like resting, people work, like humbly receiving, people give collectively. The intrinsic value of everyone participating in the needs of the household are radically different than the notions most Westerners are raised with that you can expect (or buy) services from others for your own well-being and that your helping out is a generous act or an annoying burden. Here no one asks you to please wash your dish, kids don't whine about "chores" that they have to do to help mom clean the house—rather, every person's involvement in sustaining life (from caring for a child to making tortillas to sweeping the dirt floors) results from a deep knowing that the doing for and with others is inherent to your own survival<sup>vii</sup>. Through this month of experiential learning, it became apparent that the notion and act of interdependence and collectivity is not only a primary component of traditional indigenous epistemology but also an act of resistance to the many economic threats that these small communities face.

It was with this increasing local knowledge and globalized awareness that we re-examined and tried to live more deeply the quote that had been on the top of the course syllabus since January: "*If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us walk together.*"<sup>viii</sup>

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It is with this intention that we incorporated a community engagement component in our short program. We hoped our community involvement would represent a philosophical and political shift from typical charity efforts to acts of mutual engagement, from "helping the needy" to creating a space of mutual reciprocity and nurturing. These are key components of my understanding of and involvement in teaching and directing community engagement programs at my college and an endeavor I felt was crucial to the way in which our group (of Americans) would spend its time in Mexico.

Yet it took two visits before they'd let us in the large, imposing metal gate of the institution we hoped to broach a partnership with. Once inside we signed in, cleaned our hands with their anti-bacteria cleanser, and waited, as we were told. We watched security guards and office workers scurry around and I asked Estela for a translation of the institution's sponsoring agency, an acronym whose U.S. equivalent is essentially the Department of Children and Family services. No wonder the strict security and institutional feel. After 15 minutes, we were escorted inside to meet "*La Directora*". We sat down in her office and Estela began to explain our purpose: our program was a collaboration between Pitzer College in Los Angeles and her non-profit organization here for language and inter-cultural education. We hoped that as a part of our multi-faceted program, our students would have the opportunity to give back to the local community by participating in some kind of social service at this orphanage—"No," *la directora* interrupted suddenly, ceasing her supportive nods—"this is not an orphanage. I am sorry to stop you but this is a very important distinction for us to make early on. We

are a *convivencia* (a collective living space) where we are all part of a co-created community; the children live lives full of love and support in a community atmosphere that is very different than the connotation of an orphanage. We love each of these children very much and we create a family here together.” It was then that the “institutional feel” quickly began to evaporate.

She explained that notions of charity for needy children went out the window—here was a place where children were empowered, despite their circumstances of abandonment or fractured family histories; here was a place where employees did not service the needs of unwanted children but rather worked to create a collective communal living space where everyone learned to give and receive, nurture and be nurtured, as a true family. It was then that I felt comfortable to tell her my perspective on social service—that as outsiders, Americans, strangers, we did not assume we had the ability to uplift or help the folks in this community (or that they even were asking for that from us); it was important for us to be clear that we did not arrive with this intention but rather with the hope that the doors would be open to us so that we might come to learn about and with the children and staff of this place, find areas where we could offer support, and have the opportunity to participate in a cultural and social exchange that would surely ensue.

The director heard my words and looked at some telling aspects of my dress and jewelry and leaned forward and said, “I think you will be the type to understand this but I come to this line of work from a place of profound respect for the mind, hearts and spirits of these children and believe deeply in the healing work that can be done here, in reciprocity, together.” She opened up more about how she was learning healing massage on the side (in addition to her long-completed social work and law degrees) and Estela and I then spoke of our work to ground and cleanse our social work through spiritual work in the *temazcal*, meditation and ritual. Within moments, we suddenly found ourselves, as three highly trained professionals, speaking of the unheard of—bringing spirit into service, heart into professional work, nurturing into our budding business relationship. It was a rare moment of synergy and we all agreed this coming together was not just happenstance and that this partnership would be a success. She asked simply for a formal letter stating our intended involvement and a list of the students’ names and invited us to begin immediately. And so we did.

Yet while our views on how, why, and with what intention we would participate in this community partnership were easily matched, it did not mean that our experience on the ground with the children was any easier. Initial challenges were presented simply by trying to engage and entertain 59 children of various ages with few materials and hindered language abilities. Larger challenges ensued as we saw the repercussions play out from the life circumstances these children had faced (the majority of whom were there as a result of situations of domestic violence and/or abandonment). This came about primarily in their notions of attachment. As is common for young children whose experiences of attachment were never allowed to evolve in the normal development phase of early childhood, these children either had no sense of attachment (paying us little mind

or departing abruptly and not caring about our relationships with them after certain periods of time) or demonstrating an overwhelming need for immediate attachment (instantly befriending us, becoming physically affectionate right away, pleading for us not to leave, etc). To further complicate this dynamic was the fact that they instantaneously referred to each of us as *"mami"* (mommy), which is the name they call each of their female staff members (who understandably act as their mommies day in and out, but we knew all too well that our six hour weekly engagement would end in a month). Simply hearing a child we'd just meant call us mommy gave us a startlingly sense of intimacy we neither earned nor expected. The relationships that ensued and experiences with the kids were both beautiful and painful, usually leaving all parties exhausted but sad to part at the end of the day. The staff to child ratio here was pretty low (as it is in most public institutions of childcare), resulting in a lack of sustained personal attention for each child, which consequently meant that the sudden and impassioned attention of us newcomers was a coveted commodity, pulling our attentions in multiple directions every minute of our three-hour visits. The lack of enough staff members also led to challenging situations when we were left to supervise, teach, resolve conflict and intervene with these children whom we barely knew, using our nascent degrees of Spanish language skills and child development knowledge. A particular incident illustrating this challenge comes to mind.

As I scurried between my assigned job of pushing three little girls on the swings, I noticed a group of small children (probably three years old) gathering intently around something on the ground, kneeling to pick it up, throw it at each other, then returning to investigate it with glee. I suspiciously headed in their direction only to find them fondling a dead bird. Both my Spanish language and my parenting skills seemed to fail me simultaneously—"No!" I yelled, "No toques! Parate (Don't touch it! You stop that!)"—to no avail. They continued to meddle with bird, innocently fascinated with the notion of death and dissection all at once, yet totally unaware of the potential hazards their bare hand excavations could lead to. Again, with little parenting grace, I simply pulled the children away from the bird, yelling to a staff member for a little help in getting something to pick this thing up with and get it away from the children. I then pulled the kids to the outdoor faucet. Getting them to wash their hands was the first hurdle, followed quickly by intervening in their drinking the dirty water from their hand-washing that had gathered in a cup in the sink. Before I could yank it from her little hands, I saw one rosy-checked little girl with a feisty look on her face gulp down the bacteria-ridden dirty water with a grin. I instantly felt both totally incompetent to care for these children and bewildered at how the small number of staff managed to keep them all alive for so long. Despite their best intentions to create a loving family for the many children, they were still saddled with the well-known challenge of limited funding, leading to limited bodies to mind and nurture these kids. I had hoped that our presence there might help alleviate some of those challenges, even for just a few weeks, and realized that even with eight extra bodies, there were not enough hands (and furthermore, trained and skilled hands) to go around. Herein lies a larger concern related to short-term community engagement programs that are not embedded in larger skills-based training preparations in addition, of course, to the broader problems of what resources our society deems are necessary to

align with these kinds of children services. While I believe the partnership was generally beneficial for all involved (the students learned a great deal from their engagement with the children and staff, the staff appreciated the extra hands, the children appreciated the extra attention and a respectful mutual exchange resulted overall), it left us with a deeper sense of the hurdles that exist in our own abilities to adequately address both the root causes and the palliative care needs of abused and abandoned children of the state.

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To process the rather complex issues and experiences like the one described above, every week my students participated in both written and verbal forms of reflection in order to critically assess the impacts of their cultural immersion and community engagement experiences. For most academics engaged in experiential learning, this is an inherent component of the pedagogy—that is, a belief that students’ most powerful education will result from a combination of theoretical reading, active participation in the community, and involvement in a critical forum for reflection and analysis. Through these venues, students gain a holistic understanding not only of how social issues play out in real life but also of the root causes of these social problems necessitating the social service we then attend to; likewise, they gain not only opportunities for civic and professional development but cognitive and personal growth, as well. Esteemed experiential education theorist, John Dewey, believed that learning is a wholehearted affair; that is, you can’t sever knowing and doing, and with cycles of action and reflection, one’s greatest learning occurs. Dewey was interested in the learning that resulted from the mutual exchange between people and their environment. Critical pedagogue Paulo Freire furthered these concepts by exploring the power dynamic that exists in traditional roles of teachers as the knower and students as the empty receptacles in which the teacher will deposit knowledge. He not only dismantled the inherent power dynamics in that relationship but also the idea that learning is something that is done to you, given to you, rather than something you co-create and exchange in a consciousness-raising process that involves literacy, reading, writing, action, reflection, self-awareness, relationship-building and reciprocity.

While I have directed a community engagement center and taught service-learning classes for years at my college, my interest here was in expanding our traditional practices listed above by emphasizing the final three topics of that list: “self-awareness, relationship-building and reciprocity.” I wanted to push our exploration of these even further by bringing in discussions of self-awareness that included our whole selves (our personal cosmologies, spirits, and bodies in addition to awareness of our hearts and minds) and a sense of relationship-building and reciprocity that would entail not simply other community partners but also the environment (earth, animals, plants, ancestors, and cosmos). While engaged pedagogy is already seen as too radical by many conventional standards of academia, these forays into the spirit and earth realm would be seen as downright preposterous to even many liberal academics and activists. Yet, instead of new and radical I see this integration as actually connecting us to and regenerating ancient

wisdom traditions that have succeeded in deeply educating members of our communities around the globe for thousands of years, based on the principle that one cannot fragment/ compartmentalize humans from the community, the community from the earth, nor the heart and soul away from the intellect. Further, in my years as a social justice activist, I had joined a growing movement of those who see the need for the practices of most progressives on the Left to include personal transformation as a vital component of creating the social and political transformation we advocate for.

This much-needed metamorphosis within social change movements reflects the larger changes our society must make to become a more loving, respectful and humane environment. Like the rest of society, many activists are embedded in systems and practices that shut down the heart and spirit and instead are characterized by greed, fear, isolation, competition, individualism, judgment, divisions, trauma, injustice, and mental colonization. These are real and painful experiences which thwart our abilities to open our hearts and demonstrate compassion to ourselves and others, and which further assist in maintaining us as victims of the oppressions and depressions of the world. Shifting the paradigm in which we choose to exist (and the values we hold/ practices we enact) regardless of existing oppressions is critically important for our individual and collective well-being. Allowing our intellectual and political work of social change to be connected to, integrated with or perhaps even led by our hearts and spirits is part of this shift. As West African shaman, Malidoma Some, has noted:

[We] have to de-emphasize the analytical mind and reemphasize the heart. The heart has to be allowed as much self-expression as the mind, if not more. When Westerners participate in native rituals, many break down in tears about death, drought, hunger, suffering, and injustice. When the heart is open at that level, the eyes see differently; the senses respond differently [...] Solutions to global problems might become apparent if enough people had their hearts blown open [...] There are certain problems we're not going to be able to get our heads around, no matter how much effort we apply, because we have kept our hearts shut. It's as if we're sending a message to the other side that we don't want to see it; we don't want to experience it; we don't want to feel that way. This must change because the greatest gift we have is a heart that can feel (Goodman, 7).

This quote illustrates the understanding that *in order to* effectively tackle the major issues of our times (injustices, diseases, suffering), we must create environments wherein we are free to be our whole selves, (with healthy interconnection of mind, body, heart and spirit) and where we act as united, whole communities (giving attention to relationship-building, mutual nurturing, respect, reciprocity, and humanizing Others). This shift requires deep and critical inner work as well as prioritizing spending time and energy on cultivating relationships with ourselves, our neighbors and the earth itself. "To return to old practices that are nature based and that open the door to experiencing the magic and

beauty of this world, we must de-emphasize consumerism and re-emphasize spirit (Goodman, 6)". For many this calls for acts that empower us, ground us in our own inner knowing and regenerate ancient practices of spiritual wisdom. This involves our imagination, creativity, hope, and collective construction of visions for the kind of world we'd like to advocate for. For it is our shared conscious and unconscious values, beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions that shape and inform who and how we are in the world. (Zimmerman, et al, 2010)

This forwards the simple notion that individual transformation (grounded personal awareness and mindful interconnectedness), is essential to (not separate from or less important than) group transformation (social, structural and systems change). The interdependent relationship between these transformations is what is often given little attention in the work of many agents of social change. With much energy going into the "struggle" *against* all that is unjust in the world, there is often little credence or energy given to the equally important work of cultivating inner peace. This is seen as irrelevant, warm-and-fuzzy or fluffy work or even self-indulgent. And it surely can be without thoughtful intention and integration to larger community-oriented goals. Yet striking a balance between working on one's self and with ones community on issues of mindful compassion and well-being *as they relate to* promoting these things on global scales relating to issues of poverty, oppression, and disease, can bear powerful results.

This proposal sounds logical but will not be successful without change occurring on individual, collective, institutional and systematic levels. This kind of change can be promoted by social change activists that are already seeking to build or reform a society based on peace and justice. Guides to such transformation can be sought through ancient wisdom and indigenous traditions whose cosmologies rely on foundations of reciprocity, compassion, mindfulness, interconnectedness and respect for community (including material and non-material beings). Efforts to include a spiritual element of renewal into activist movements is both a new and very old proposal. "Movement leaders and organizers within the secular progressive movement are increasingly turning to transformative and spiritual practices to help them radically re-imagine social change. [...] Transformative movement builders seek to synthesize wisdom and practice from spiritual traditions (often focused on deep inner transformation) with social change traditions of the Left (generally focused on social analysis and systems change)." (Zimmerman, et al, 2010, 13- 15).

It is with this intention that I created the "Healing Ourselves and Healing our Communities" course. And it was through this course (in both Los Angeles and in Mexico) wherein students engaged in theoretical readings about these cosmologies and epistemologies (ranging from those of Thich Nhat Hanh, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi to current and ancient Mayan and Native American essays and codices). And it was through experiential learning in these ancient healing practices (from sweat lodges to herbal medicine and community actions) that I witnessed a depth of personal transformation that is so vital for effective social transformation. The response

from the students (emotionally, intellectually, physically and spiritually) revealed their hunger for this kind of holistic education and activism. As such, they enthusiastically participated in meditation and song, learning theories of indigenous knowledge traditions, engaging in social service, and reflecting on the impact of all of the above on our intellectual understanding as well as emotional well-being and spiritual grounding. Again, I agree with Malidoma Some who claims: “A lot of young people come alive when the spirit is present. They can be themselves and show their genius” (Goodman, 6).

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The experiential activities, guest lectures, and readings in Mexico introduced the students to a radically different way of seeing and being in the world. Mesoamerican traditions operate from a foundation of fluid duality (instead of static, hierarchical dualism) and a balanced, interconnected sense of equilibrium (instead of a fixed sense of equality or “sameness”). Duality is a key principal in all aspects of Mesoamerican life and instructed the creation and maintenance of the cosmos, earth, and social relations per the balance of masculine and feminine properties. While seen as existing in opposite poles, these qualities are enmeshed in a relationship based on maintaining balance within this bi-polar sphere. Fusion of these complementary opposites strikes equilibrium by virtue of difference. Rejecting notions of “equality” or “sameness,” survival and thriving depends on the ability to create a balance between the differences and the harmony that results is evident in the functioning of relationships between and among humans, animals, deities, cosmos and the earth. When equilibrium and balance between all spiritual, ecological and social relations is necessary to create and maintain interconnectivity, collective responsibility involves a community-centered rather than self-centered strategy for surviving and thriving.

The opportunity to explore these concepts in action through spiritual ritual cleansings and traditional herbal medicines with revered *curanderos* (healers) of the community provided a very rare way in which to immerse students into Mexican culture, knowledge, and traditions. *Curanderos* are seen as very important, powerful and wise leaders of the community; ones who reached their esteemed position through calling, family lineage or personal experience and whose *don* (gift) is directly and deeply spiritual. *Curandero* literally translates to the one who knows how to pronounce the measure suitable to restore balance. Restoring balance (regaining health) is key to recovering from a state of disequilibrium (illness). Interconnectedness of humans and cosmos is reiterated in this realm of health/ balance and illness/ disequilibrium as the tradition teaches that “the sickness localized in the body cannot be separated in certain form from disorder at the cosmic level” (Marcos, 2001, 255). In these traditional indigenous practices, “healing” cannot be separated from “ritual” and vice versa. “Primitive medicine is primarily spiritual medicine, based on disease of the soul, bodily diseases being symptoms of soul disease (Ackerknecht 1970: 20; Bidney 1963: 144; Fabrega 1971: 386). Thus, concepts and practices of medicine are inextricably intertwined with the religious, the former being a lesser aspect of the latter (Glick 1967: 32-33)” (Andrews, 34).

The depth of cultural knowledge and personal work that the students underwent in their experiences with the *curanderos* was profound. A principal belief of these cosmologies is that each person retains *aires* (winds) that are essentially the emotional baggage that result from traumas. They range from fear to resentment, anger to sadness and nine others. The belief is that these enter you and stay with you, casting your soul astray until you have called it back and cleansed yourself of the baggage—releasing *los aires* as you thank them for the lessons they brought you. This release and calling back of yourself to yourself can be sought through healing rituals conducted by the curandera (sometimes including energetic massages and herbal remedies), through ceremony, and through sweating (and singing, chanting, praying, releasing) within the sweat lodge.

It can also be sought through your own deep connecting with yourself and the earth, where in personal meditations, one can relinquish *los aires* back to the earth. Students had opportunities for this kind through our weekly excursions to various natural parks throughout Morelos. At the ethnobotanical gardens, we learned about the many curing properties of plants we knew well (chamomile, papaya, cocoa, wormwood, elderberry, etc) and ones that were native to this land and unknown to us. At *las huertas* (springs) we swam in natural spring water that flowed through a forest, so that we literally were floating within the roots of gigantic trees in water as pure, clean, and sweet as you can imagine. At *las grutas* (caves) we walked two miles deep into the earth to witness sandcastle-like creations in caverns as large as ten-story buildings, with nothing but the sound of the same wind and water that had been slowly passing through for centuries, creating the majestic fissures in which we strolled. In Tepotzlan, we hiked through lush rainforests to reach the high pyramids as ancient as the traditions we studied. Through these meditative journeys deep into various elements, we re-connected and cultivated our relationship with our own bodies and spirits as a reflection of the earth that grounds us. This promoted a greater ethic in terms of the need to care for the earth and for our bodies through the realization that we are of the same essence.

With this connection to the earth and our own emotional, physical and spiritual bodies, with an intentional grounding in our own inner knowing and peace, we found ourselves more energized and connected to the needs of others, thus bringing us full circle toward “healing our communities.” And it was precisely through this holistic experience that authentic personal transformation (both spiritual and academic) and social change (with the local community and in broader activist efforts linking the local and global) became possible.

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This leaves us with the final question of how we might successfully integrate all this learning and growth back in our lives at home. This refers not only to carrying the emotional and spiritual grounding we cultivated in Mexico back to the U.S. but also enacting our understanding of how our country’s actions and lifestyles impact the

communities we had grown close to there. In final discussions, it became apparent that the students began to understand how the way they live their lives (in terms of personal transformation) has a collective social impact. Their connection between continuing their inner work while navigating community work back home emerged as a natural link. Further, they realized that they didn't have to go anywhere in order to have an impact on the broader issues of injustice they cared about. Instead of creating further depression or apathy, recognizing the role the U.S. plays in furthering the damaging impacts of globalization in Mexico ignited a sense of empowerment as the students began to see how they actually possessed abilities to direct their actions locally in a way that could have global impact (through what they support with their consumer dollars and how they interact with transnational corporations that reside in their backyards). They spoke of how they not only wanted to react to the exploitative repercussions of globalization, but also simultaneously to begin to imagine and create alternatives to these trends. They echoed the sentiments of Black history scholar, Robin D.G. Kelley, who notes: "Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us." (2002)

Instead of following a violent path of resistance, these youth spoke of the need for critically reforming systems and institutions rather than dismantling them altogether. This does not mean giving up dreams of a better world; in fact, it demands that we function both within and outside of the realms of the current system, demanding changes of ourselves and the institutions we uphold (or are held under by) while simultaneously dreaming up entirely new (or regenerating old) values, cosmologies, political systems and social paradigms in which we could exist. This requires focusing on the existing strengths and assets in communities, rather than perpetuating a system that depicts marginalized populations as needy victims in need of more paralyzing services. This insists that social uplift is taking place through collective practices of decolonization, cultural affirmation and inter-culturalism, while recognizing that concepts of hope, love and compassion are viable pillars of political organizing. It underscores the efforts that are being made to regenerate traditional models of interconnected and self-reliant communities through local and sustainable food, water, energy, and economic systems. It also highlights how people are finding that often in this process of rooting down and nurturing their diverse communities, there is a move beyond the endless critiques of our systems' failures as we imagine a new world into being. Indeed, moving our focus towards the creations of new visions of our world is crucial for any lasting change to occur. As preeminent scholar of radical activism, Laura Pulido, suggests, "Among dominated communities, fundamental change does not occur through the ballot box, or even through mass uprisings, although both can play important roles. Rather, it centers on producing a shift in consciousness—an alternative vision of what the world might look like, an expanded sense of personal efficacy (often called empowerment), and a clear set of demands—and on systematically mobilizing. Such changes constitute the beginning of a movement." (2006) Lest we limit the concept of "movement" to our political realm, this program revealed that, if we are open to it, movement can occur in our hearts, bodies, and spirits; in the regeneration of

traditional cosmologies and ancient wisdom practices; and finally, in the migration of cultures and knowledge across borders in ways that ignite genuine personal and social transformation.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> I use the term “development” in its mainstream connotation (often used in conjunction with first, second, and third world labels) while acknowledging fully the cultural bias and contradictions embedded with this term and concept.

<sup>ii</sup> I use “we” because I include myself with the students as a recipient of continuous learning throughout this program. While I have studied many of these topics throughout my 24 years of formal education (pre-K through PhD), I was consistently surprised at the gaps in my own knowledge base regarding an array of economic and social issues in the history of U.S.-Mexico relations.

<sup>iii</sup> These and the subsequent statistical citations come from the lecture provided by Ross Gandy, based in large part on findings from his recent book: Hodges, D.C. & Gandy, R., (2002). “Mexico: The end of the revolution”. Westport: Praeger Press.

<sup>iv</sup> This paragraph cites many ideas and statistics from Naomi Klein’s wonderful essay, “Reclaiming the Commons” in Tom Mertes’ anthology, Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible? New York: Verso. 2004.

<sup>v</sup> For a plethora of examples and excellent accompanying analysis see: Jerry Mander and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, *Paradigm wars: Indigenous peoples resistance to globalization*. International Forum on Globalization, 2004.

<sup>vi</sup> For examples of these anti-globalization movements, see the radical anthology: Notes from Nowhere, Eds. *We are Everywhere: The rise of global anti-capitalism*. Verso: 2004.

<sup>vii</sup> I recognize, of course, that I am making sweeping generalizations about culturally diverse nations (Mexico and the U.S.) and there are invariably many exceptions to the rules I outline here. I also understand that traditional Mexican values change over time with greater exposure to and mixing with other cultures. That said, I do find that there are some broad, traditional cultural values and practices that I see practiced again and again with many families here that seem to have blatant differences with the values and practices I see promoted generally in the U.S.

<sup>viii</sup> Lila Watson, Australian Aborigine