

Savor



Only in the oldest cultures is time found for savoring life. In the U.S. pleasure flickers at the moment of gratification. The game is won; the purchase made; the degree earned. Life is not for celebration but only for engagement toward the next objective. In the perpetual quest to maximize my options, I remain confident of success and comfortably aware that others' failures will account for any setback.

In much of Western Europe and Scandinavia, the constellation is different: People take turns savoring life. Service to others frees my conscience such that I may enjoy others' service to me. Life is only savored to the extent that guilt is held at bay.

In contrast, Asians hold a deep, pervasive appreciation for life--an appreciation of beauty when it happens, accompanied in my every moment of life by an unassuming obligation to perfect my own unobtrusive component of that beauty... Yet it is another ancient culture that recently taught me what it means to savor life. It is the culture of the exploited, of the oppressed, of those who are permitted little more than each other... You see, the gentle people of Mexico understand the meaning of savor.



“One hundred and twenty pesos? But we only paid 40 pesos to get here this afternoon.” Negotiating with one taxi driver after another, we were beginning to realize that there are no cheap taxis once you have seen a tourist attraction like La Quebrada. Of course we could hike closer to the center of Acapulco, but it was twilight and our distant hotel beckoned its comforts. “Señor. Will you still take us to the Princess Hotel for 80 pesos? Good! ... O.K. for 80 pesos.” The negotiation completed, we stepped into the driver's taxi.

Later, while pulling into an intersection, a truck--full of cheering people and bedecked with red flags--swerved in front of us. It was followed closely by a Volkswagen beetle--also covered in red--with loudspeakers mounted on top that blared in shrill Spanish. More cars and trucks followed. Our driver impatiently pried his way through and past the cheers.

They were promoting a political party but not the “party of change,” we were told between stop lights and veerings amongst the traffic. “Mexico has

many riches but they are all in only 20 hands.... I don't want big change, only a little justice.... What you see of Acapulco is not how the real people live." ... And so he agreed to show us the reality we had been missing.



We headed north, up into the hills that surrounded the bay, along mile after mile of stone walls of faded paint, past vacant lots of rusty machines and dogs--lots of dogs. Suddenly he braked and turned up a steep dirt road to the right. Then right again. And then left up a road even steeper than the last, with wheels spinning, swerving until it leveled enough again to give the engine a rest. The road was parched but cut deep with gullies where heavy rains had once washed much of the road away. Once we hung--stuck amongst them--and all climbed out to push.

Finally the driver slowed to a stop, and quietly pointed down an alley. "Do you see the second entry way? ... No. The one on the right, next to the light." That's where he lived, with his family, in three rooms, up the dirt path, on the right, next to the light....

There was more to talk about as we returned to the bay and ascended along the cliffs: the house owned by Sylvester Stalone, the largest disco in town, a mansion built by the Shah of Iran, ... But then the driver pulled over again, this time into a parking space at cliff's edge.

We all climb out. The traffic and the sounds behind us fade as we are greeted by the thinnest of crescent moons in a deep onyx sky. Acapulco is a sprinkle of the tiniest points of light, each with its own shimmering reflection across the bay. It is at once beautiful ... , and not beautiful.... Because we know that nearly every point shines from a dirt alley, scarred by gullies and inopportunity. We savor the moment, not because it is beautiful, not because it is obscene, but because it is both and neither at once. To proclaim it one or the other would be to decimate something sacred. It would be unforgivably profane.... Besides, it is getting late, and the spell is broken.

We entered back into the taxi, into the profane existence we had just been given the privilege to leave.... Having shown us the "real Acapulco," how could we pay him a mere 80 pesos? Yet as we approached the hotel I couldn't help but wonder, "Had he conned us into paying more than the agreed-upon price?" I start pushing the thought into the back of my mind, ... at least until I remember

the moment. Of course! We had been conned and not conned--both and neither at once. To have insisted on one or the other would have broken the ambiguity and lost the sanctity of the moment. We paid the driver with a 100 peso bill and a smile.



We had not been the object of a con but rather one of a seduction--of a process of coy negotiation in which both parties give, both parties get, but neither takes from the other. To U.S. citizens, the word, "permission," sounds so vile that we have virtually banished it from our vocabulary. Rather than say, "May I?", we ask, "Can I?"--as if all we accomplish is a reflection of our individual capacities, devoid of others' help in our empowerment. Although this serves well to keep our self-confidence in tact, it is worth considering what we lose in the process:

Like the taxi driver, teachers introduce ambiguity into the student's world. When faced with a difficult assignment, the student might wonder if it is "within" or "beyond" her or his abilities. To savor this ambiguity is to find challenge in the assignment. To insist that the assignment is easy ("beneath me") or impossible ("above me") would be to decimate the sanctity of the moment. When students do this, they no longer permit their teachers to teach them. The moment is lost, the classroom profane.

Of course, assignments must be the same for all students--leaving the teacher's greatest skill to be proven when students ask for help. Sometimes more help is needed than at others. A good teacher must be sensitive to this--permitting the student just enough of an answer to keep the moment from turning profane (i.e., as either above or beneath the student's abilities).

Like the taxi driver who "got" but did not "take" our money, good students will permit their teachers to give them only what they need to make their assignments challenging again. To take more than this would be to use, not to seduce one's teacher. It would also prevent the teacher from seducing the student to try her or his best. Learning only happens when teacher and student jointly permit each other to savor the challenge of the moment.

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Ames, June 2000