

Usefulness

Back in my two long, slow months at the clinic in La Garrucha memorizing Spanish vocabulary lists from Marquez and Werner and watching the sun crawl overhead, I used to feel frustrated that I wasn't working, wasn't contributing, wasn't doing anything much but wait and eat like a bored, wasted tapeworm in the gut of the uprising. I thought, Godsdammit, I've got all these skills and knowledge and stuff that's exceedingly rare in these parts, and I went to a lot of trouble to come here for a finite time to volunteer, and then the *junta* of Government At Random went and fucked it up with the help of my then-lousy Spanish. (Last night I happened to run into a guy who was on that *junta*, and we got along great. I haven't managed to hold a grudge.) It offended my sense of efficiency; resources should be used, not squandered. This would be an obvious place to let an anonymous and long-dead person in an irrelevant context do my thinking for me by quoting a cliché about being careful what you wish for, but I'm glad I got it. I'm now working right around a nice normative 40 hours a week.

From Monday to Wednesday I teach in Emiliano Zapata where the school day is short, the kids don't want to work, and school is often canceled unexpectedly. Last week, for instance, I came back from my other job so I could teach at 8:00 Monday morning, and at 8:00 Monday morning I found an empty schoolhouse. Dean and Gene, the education promoters, needed to work in their cornfields that week. That was the day after I turned 23, so I interpreted it as a birthday present and spent the week down by the riverside finishing *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

(It was the Hare Krsna edition, and the Calvinist mood of its Vedic interpretations surprised the hell out of me: sex is a "sin;" by tempting men into this, sin women distract them from the true path. They should obey their husbands, the lower castes and the poor deserve what they get, and if you're feeling charitable you should give your money to Hare Krsna gurus instead. Also, thinking is dangerous, so for true spiritual wisdom you should ask a Hare Krsna guru and then just believe whatever he tells you. I have no idea how George Harrison got from '60s counterculture to this puritanical, authoritarian weirdness, and I think the backpack button "My karma ran over your dogma" is verbally clever but totally nonsensical.)

Anyway, I think we're supposed to start at 8:00 and go until a one-hour *pozol* break that starts at 10:30 and ends at 11:30, after which we would theoretically then have school from 11:30 until 1:00. But what normally happens is that we start more or less on time, Dean and Gene let the kids go around 9:40, and then we come back at like a quarter to noon and play soccer or some other game. And then there's a little bit of school afterwards and I have the afternoon free.

Zapatista education divides kids into three numbered levels, plus preschool, which I'd say has kids from about 5 to 7 years old. Then 7- to 9-year-olds are first level, 9- to 11-year-olds are second level, and 11- to 13-year-olds are third level. Something like that,

although I'm guessing the ages and advancement to the automatic level depends not on age but on passing a test. (I think you can dress that up in jargon by saying they don't practice social promotion.)

Teaching the second level kids in Zapata is hard, or at least I think so. One problem is all the class time that there isn't. Another is that when there is class it's always like pulling teeth to get the kids to do anything. I really got exasperated when Guadalupe, a normally well-behaved girl held back from graduating to third level last year because she couldn't read, brought a little jar of glitter and started flinging bits of it at boys' heads. First they'd fight back against her and then they'd understandably want to spend the next 10 minutes ignoring school and trying to get glitter out of their hair. (Forgive them, for they know not Ziggy Stardust.) Whenever a truck passes on the highway everyone get up to go watch like they've never seen a truck pass on the highway before. Sometimes they'll even do it for horses. After a half hour of class they'll start saying it's time to go eat *pozol*. There's a kid named Carlos, who, if I give him any simple instruction that I know he understands, will immediately say yes, nod curtly, and then sit there like he's already done it... until I tell him three more times. And then there's Pedro, who often isn't there, but when he is he has no idea how perfectly his demeanor would be suited by the English, "Fuck all y'all." It's frustrating as hell, and I don't think I could ever be a teacher as a career. At least that's how it is if I'm up in front teaching everyone in the second level. The days when I get to take the illiterate students one by one to work on their reading are generally easier. With a girl named Francisca I can understand why: the first time I asked her what letter B was she thought it was a 6. So whenever class somehow involves reading she's bored and probably embarrassed as well and fools around. I never saw her interested in what she was supposed to be doing until the first time I worked alone with her to improve her reading, which at her level meant teaching the alphabet. She just didn't want to stop, she was finally having someone take the time to tell her individually which letters are which, and she was enthusiastic and tireless for a good hour. That was cool.

Another problem is that the kids I teach in Zapata have all been well trained into the idea that schoolwork = copying what's on the blackboard. So, on the one hand, when I wrote on the board that in Brazil there's a peasant movement called the MST that recuperates plantations, I knew that the kids would sit still long enough to copy that and then come to show me their notebooks with expressions that said, "I've done everything I'm supposed to." But when I asked what's the name of the peasant movement in Brazil that recuperates plantations no one could tell me, not even the ones who I know can read. Only when I had Guadalupe read the whole thing aloud twice did she get this sort of *Ohhhhhhhhhhh!* look on her face, *So the stuff that we copy off the blackboard conveys information, whuddyyaknow*. So I realized I can't teach anything that way, but it also usually doesn't work just to try to talk to the group; if there's nothing to copy off the board then they think they've got no work to do. They'll work pretty well on the multiplication table and copying maps, and that's about it as far for my non-individual teaching successes in Zapata.

After three days there, I get up on Thursday morning three hours before dawn in order to arrive in San Antonio Samaria before the school day starts some time after eight. San Antonio Samaria, Pancho Villa, and other parts of the same valley were once part of the

same plantation, which was owned by a whip-happy, un-fondly-remembered bastard whose name I can't recall but who'd probably make for a fascinating banality-of-evil sort of interview if I could track him down in San Cris or Madrid or Miami or whatever gold-plated rock he crawled under after choosing to leave rather than die in the beautifully overgrown slave revolt of 1994. In 1979 the Mexican government bought a big chunk of his plantation to make it an *ejido*, which is untranslatable because it's the traditional institution of Mexican collective peasant agriculture and has no American counterpart. Collective in the sense that the tough-to-impossible legal process of splitting off and selling any one piece of the land used to be a slash-and-burn-and-sell neoliberal's worst democratic nightmare, which is why the Mexican government had to abolish ("liberalize") that bit of food security as a condition of NAFTA, which was one of the proximate causes of the Zapatista uprising. Anyway, Samaria was an *ejido* before they joined the EZLN. Twenty minutes away by foot is Pancho Villa, which used to be the heart of the plantation, complete with the house of the plantation owner, several rooms of stone, hewn and hauled under the lash when the peasants lived in huts. (I now think that Audre Lourde was wrong or at least metaphorical; yes, you can dismantle the master's house with the master's tools, smash a window with a shovel, and the window doesn't care to whom the shovel belongs.) Because Samaria used to be an *ejido*, it is thus not "recuperated land" in the sense that there in no registry of deeds anywhere in the world is there a piece of paper alleging that this isolated place where they've been scratching a living from the dirt for as long as they can remember actually belongs to an absentee, evicted bloodsucker now sipping cocktails on the Riviera and swapping I-hate-Marcos rants for Mugabe-is-a-monkey diatribes with wrinkly white Rhodesian exiles. Here's the surprising part: that somehow means that the Zapatistas there are willing to cooperate with the big bad Mexican government to bring the highway to town, complete with power lines, engineers and surveyors to arrive before Christmas, with unhurried work crews to follow in the springtime.

The good government junta actually agreed to that.

This from an organization that forewent and continues to forego the painfully tantalizing possibility of sending its very own comrades to be fully trained as doctors for free in Cuba on the grounds that Castro's government may be communist but it's still a government; what I'd call ideology getting in the way of doing the right thing, and that, according to Jose-T., shocked and disappointed many a venerable Latin revolutionary by refusing a gracious and rather risky invitation from Evo Morales to come to Bolivia for the ceremonies celebrating the inauguration of the first indigenous peasant ever to ride a massive social movement into the presidency of a Latin American republic. It's like watching a vegan friend scathingly scrutinize the ingredients list on a bottle of organic salad dressing and then nonchalantly eat a double quarter-pounder with cheese. I mean, they're not my principles, but still, the inconsistency does throw one for a loop, no? But the main thing is that they ought to have road access by the winter solstice after this one. As it is, I'd guess that being charged with the job of getting a woman with a breech birth from there to the hospital in the rainy season could make a pretty fair definition of hell.

Schedule again. In Samaria they're far more disciplined than in Zapata, the one-hour 10:30 *pozol* break doesn't start until 10:30, and then it ends not long after 11:30. Also,

when I explained at the community what-should-we-do-with-this-gringo meeting that I teach in Zapata from Monday to Wednesday every week, they just up and switched their school week to Thursday to Saturday cuz that's when I can be there. They also offered to give me all my food free and already prepared, both of which are different from in Zapata, and they extended the school day by one hour to two o'clock. Their kids in general are far more interested or disciplined than the ones in Zapata; I can generally just teach without wasting time on stupid shit. Sometimes there I teach a dozen first-level students, who I think are further along than the second-levels in Zapata. Other times I teach the four second-level students, who are about equivalent to the third-levels in Zapata. And last Saturday I taught both because Mark and Vincent, the education promoters, had to go pick up school supplies from two different places, and that was my only bad day so far. I think the second-level kids wanted to impress the first-levels with how badass they were, and then the first levels didn't want to be shown up. But when the second-levels got called away by radio to haul notebooks from the highway, everything went back to normal. In a nearly paranormal coincidence, I thought that the 13-year-old making the most trouble was bad enough that day to remind me of Pedro in Emiliano Zapata, and that he kinda looked like him too. Then 10 seconds later he wrote Pedro's full name on the side of the school in pink chalk. That's actually not as spooky as it sounds because in the jungle there aren't many first or last names to go around.

When school ends there, I spend another hour teaching Mark and Vincent, each of whom had a second-grade education 10 years ago in a foreign language. Their knowledge base is very impressive considering where they got it: they can add, subtract, multiply, divide, read sentences without big words, and write with many phonetic misspellings (like *ermanita* for *hermanita*). Like many people I know here, they're unaware of both Spanish past tenses as well as the Spanish word for "ago." (A few days ago when I was trying to figure out how I was supposed to cross a river to come into Ocosingo directly from Pancho Villa without passing through Zapata, a *compañero* told me something I'd translate as, "Yes, in the past there is a bridge there, but it falls down already three years old already," or in Spanish, "*Si, en el pasado hay puente allá pero se cae ya tiene años ya.*") At their request, I'm teaching them square roots, area calculations, and how to convert between metric units of different sizes.

Now I'm gonna describe Vincent's house. I don't think I've talked about housing at all. Vincent is relatively well off: his house is made of boards nailed to posts. (In Pancho Villa the kitchen of two of my students betrays no hint of cash expenditure: it's sticks tied together with one kind of grass and then covered with another kind of grass held up by more sticks. And, of course, it's a dirt floor, what else would the floor be made out of? Incidentally Spanish uses the same word for "floor" and "ground," *suelo*, which is appropriate here but very surprising considering that the rich reactionary Madridniks who police the language from the *Real Academia Español* do not live in houses with dirt floors.) Lumbered boards mean that Vincent had the money to pay a guy with a big chain saw (*motosierrista*) to cut up some logs for him, as well as the money to buy nails. The labor was, naturally and necessarily, free; he and his two brothers worked for a month to build the house. It's one room about 15 feet by 40 feet. In all that space the only furniture is a bed, a table, and a chair, all of which he cut, joined, sanded, stained, and polished by hand, just like the doors, into which he carved the Virgin Mary. The ground is more or

less level. The ceiling is peaked and made of sheets of corrugated metal called *lamina* that I guess are tin, though no one I've asked recognizes the word (*estaño*). Having a tin roof is a mark of not living in the direst poverty. Being able to move on up from thatch required the equivalent of several hundred dollars, I think Vincent said eight hundred, which he called "extremely expensive" (*carísimo*). Whoa, shit, is he ever right, thank you, Google. Since around the start of last year, the price of tin has jumped from under 30 pesos a pound into the 80s. That's quite a run-up. Why? According to the November Base Metals Monthly Briefing, "Most of the factors that are currently driving tin prices higher – uncertainty concerning Indonesian output, relatively low exports from China, and limited production growth outside of the two leading producers – are likely to remain in place for some time. On the assumption that the sub-prime crisis does not trigger a sector-wide correction, there is the potential (based on tin's individual fundamentals) for new highs in the market." That means that a substantially higher proportion of peasants building new houses here have to settle for a thatch roof that they'll have to rethatch every few years. Maybe I should try explaining these supply constraints to the *compañeros*. I used to be an economics tutor, you see; that's how I made the money I've been spending while I'm here.

When I went to the bank yesterday to withdraw some of that money, I explained to the lady who waited on me how the largest bloc of shares in Citigroup, her ultimate employer, was bought a couple weeks ago for around \$10 billion by the emir of Abu Dhabi, who, due to the \$100 a barrel oil brought about by the Iraq war, is sitting on a huge stash of petrodollars he wanted to get rid of because the dollar is declining relative to other major currencies. She seemed pretty interested and wanted to know where Abu Dhabi was, and then perhaps fortunately we finished before I got to the part about the massive global layoffs he'll probably undertake because the books are bleeding in the subprime lending crisis, which bad loans probably extend far enough above subprime to sum into the vicinity of \$400 billion. Walking away I thought it was funny how that conversation with the bank teller was just the kind of not-very-meaningful vignette Thomas Friedman would use as a jumping off point for a Panglossian Rah! Rah! Rah!, globalization brings us all the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Yesterday, after that trip to the local Banamex office, Banamex's owner, Citibank, after I've been in Chiapas for five months, suddenly noticed that someone is withdrawing my money from Central American ATMs. They froze my account on the suspicion that I've been a victim of identity theft, and they sent me an international toll-free customer service number to call so I can unfreeze the account on the off chance that I am in fact myself. They said it'd work in Mexico, but the robot lady who answered when I called that number disagrees: "The toll free number you have dialed is not available from your calling area." So I now have no money except for what I already had in cash before they froze my account, which fortunately was like sixty bucks, which was plenty to buy a sweatshirt for those cold Samarian nights and still enough to last me until the *encuentro*. I can live pretty damn cheap when my only expense is beans and rice for my half-week in Zapata, plus a weekly commute that costs less than three dollars round trip. [kmkat: He subsequently called a different international toll-free number and got the account unfrozen, so now he has access to the funds I loaned him.]

Just after three I make the 20-minute walk to Pancho Villa, the place where I'll leave my heart come April. This is the community where last month Cassius was imploring me to teach his kids. On the day of the meeting between the two communities Joe the *responsable* told me that, after talking it over with the *compañeras*, there were actually only two guys in the community who wanted to study, so I should just take them to the meeting with the *compañeros* from Samaria that he wasn't going to bother attending. That was so far out of line with what I'd been expecting and hoping for that I just decided not to believe it. (By the way, *esperar* is the most frustratingly ambiguous verb in the Spanish language because it means "to expect," "to hope" and also "to wait." So anytime I wanna say one of those three things I feel like I have to try to specify whether I'm waiting, expecting, or hoping, except without being able to use any of those words, I'd appreciate a solution to that if anyone here knows one.) So I went to the meeting, where the two guys Joe sent did not open their mouths. When Mark told me they'd switched the school week I said, oh wonderful, does that mean I could teach here in the day and in Pancho Villa in the afternoon? And then after someone said, Sure, I guess I grabbed onto that and acted like the matter was completely settled. On the one hand that means I've come a long way from August, when I would need three repetitions of a question just to figure what the good government junta was asking me, but on the other hand it felt a bit funny doing that, funny meaning "manipulative." But Joe the *responsable* didn't do his job, so I did it for him. When I came back to Villa with the news that I could teach class there in the late afternoon after everyone gets back from the corn fields, so that a student can study without sacrificing a full day's scrabbling for next year's tortillas, then I had the dozen students I'd been expecting. After two years with no education at all they're hungry and would be downright easy to teach if they weren't spread across various levels. Some I can teach to subtract, while others can't remember whether 70 is seventy or ninety and have to practice writings threes, sixes, and nines until they weren't upside down or backwards anymore. It's a fun challenge, though, even with little Domingo, the kid to whom I am still unable to explain clearly that "2+3 =" calls for the number 5, not a tireless sequence of painstakingly scratched "2+3 = 2+3 = 2+3 = 2+3 = 2+3 =" wobbling its childish way down the page.

Andrew

P.S. It could happen that I'll be out of email contact until mid-January. I know I won't be coming back into town before the *encuentro* at the end of the month, and after that there'll be meetings between the San Manuel autonomous council and Chiapas Support Committee attending the *encuentro*. After that I'll be heading up to Mexico City for a few days before flying out to visit my folks in Wisconsin from January 13 to the 27.