

Chiapas, Mexico

Emily's Entry

I had never been to Mexico. The night before we left, my Dad got out the road Atlas and we pored over the names of tiny southern towns. "That's where we're going" I told him "Somewhere down there." You try to picture a place you've never seen, but it's mostly dreamlike images. Places with catholic sounding names, songs in Spanish, I pictured guns. Little by little, as we traveled in our motley bunch, real images presented themselves, physical things that could be touched or smelled or heard; the bustling Mexico City Airport, thick, wavy heat and the smell of jet fuel, the names of airlines painted in bright blue & green on planes, policeman walking in twos, menacing and masculine. Some of us were like kids on field trip. A little sleepy from all the excitement, buzzing with anticipation, slumped & reading, comparing the contents of back packs, loading film.

The flight from Mexico City to Tuxtla was short. We flew by a very tall, pale mountain, singular peak. The landing involved a very sharp turn left and severe descent, finally onto what looked from the air like a tiny black paved strip in the middle of nowhere. As we taxied in, I saw men with machine guns strapped across them, dark blue uniforms against a white building. Nameless men with guns. We must have been a strange sight, a bunch of Americans some with guitars, multi colors of back packs following the direction of two women Cecilia and her friend, who led us into three VW vans and an old Dodge car/truck whatever it was. Then we headed towards San Cristobal.



Michelle Malone, Amy Ray and Emily Saliers



Michelle Malone, Amy Ray, Sara Lee and Emily Saliers

Night time had come as we wound our way up and around an endless mountain on a two lane road with no rules. Little lights twinkled below in the valleys. Again, in darkness everything became dreamlike with us three in the back-seat asking endless questions of Cecilia who answered them from the front patiently, as her friend played the cassette tapes of music and we ate plain crackers. A break in questioning and the two women spoke in Spanish, laughing, gesticulating, speaking of serious things. We learned about the history of the Zapatista movement, what promises had been made by the Mexican government; all broken, the

women from villages who been raped on roads and were afraid to travel anywhere, the struggles of the Mayan people, the racism against them, a battle for dignity and the restoration of indigenous ways of life, a fair distribution of land. Cecilia talked on and we asked on and jostled about in the back seat, leaning into the curves, the music like a soundtrack to some enfolding film of discovery.

To reach the village, we drove, finally, down a dusty, pothole marked road in the pitch blackness and passed two or three trucks, loaded with the trunks of freshly fallen trees, stolen from the jungle. They only go in and out at night taking away their spoils and bringing nothing back. They slunk past us stealing distance between us as fast as they could. In the rearview mirror I could see the headlights of the three vans, illuminated like familiar faces, carrying our envoy of seekers. It was the darkest of nights and all of the road looked exactly the same through five hours of broken sleep as Cecilia and her friend sang songs in Spanish, swooping melodies and passionate entreaties, laughing when one messed up the lyrics, chiding playfully. So many, many songs, all different and yet strung together. It felt like music that keeps people alive, familiar beyond thought, perfect under the bold light of the moon, in the mist of green tree slopes, barely perceptible outside the car windows. It felt like the longest drive I had ever taken, a strange mix of monotony and mystery and wonder at what lay ahead.



Village life



Lining up for the farewell procession - Oventic. - A.R.

We rolled into the village around 3:30 am, Cecilia and her friend speaking to three or so young men whose faces were beautiful and kind and laughing. From then on, it was a sort of catatonic hum of activity as many unrolled their sleeping bags onto the large empty floor of the school room. Belongings were set aside, cool air came in through the open windows and door. I set up a small tent right outside the schoolroom, all cockeyed and unbalanced but shelter nonetheless, and crawled inside to sleep. It was 4 am and we were painfully tired.

When I woke, I sensed people stirring outside the tent. It was 7:30 am - I remember unzipping the tent and almost holding my breath, not knowing what I'd see in the bright morning sun. As I first stood and stretched and looked all about, I was immediately struck by how green it was. The outlying jungle was the thickest green I had ever seen, rising up high hill slopes. It looked both tropical and forest like. The sky was cloudless blue and small streams of smoke rose from the village. Someone far off was chopping wood. Huts were scattered about as far as I could see and a small river or stream was in the near distance. A big fat tree with long arms and twisted branches stood in front. There was perfect early morning quiet and the sun's promise of a very hot day coming.

Soon we were headed off in small groups, lead down over the stream, past the little shop (where they sold sodas, eggs, batteries, chips and other goods) to a large table. A family served everyone eggs tortillas and coffee. Those are the staples of the villages' diet: beans, tortillas and coffee. It was a most beautiful feast, served in simple bowls and mismatched cups. Chickens clucked about and kittens lazed under foot. Dogs, very skinny with rib bones showing, hovered, hoping for scraps or scratches. A small boy with no clothes held a ball tightly and stared at us. I can't imagine what we must have looked like to him, even though visitors come and go on occasion. Behind him a man was working on wood. Colorful clothes hung from rafters. Insects buzzed in the heat.



Speaking before the music begins

For the next two days we stayed in the village, at one point gathering under the big tree by the river, pulling out tiny chairs from the schoolroom and asking questions of Cecilia. Cecilia answered countless questions during the trip. I think there were those of us who wanted to visit, collect all the information we could and then return to the states where we would immediately effect change by writing letters, making calls, getting articles published, doing, doing, doing. This, however, was a place with history etched in its trees, with the ageless lives of the indigenous peoples swirling through the river water, with a social movement that had been planned for years, it was the beginning of the 'revolution before the revolution' and there was absolutely no way to absorb it all in a matter of a few days. So while we sat around and sweat through the thick heat and thought and questioned and prayed and ate and tried to speak to the children who hovered at the doorway to the schoolroom, I simply tried to be in it. "Listen with your hearts" Cecilia implored.



Soccer game

About the children: they were the most beautiful children I had ever seen, each one special, as at first one ventured to the outskirts of our camp, then two, then a few more until there were many, always around, by the end of the trip. Most hated to have their pictures taken, so I tried to etch the image of their faces into my memory. Kathlyn spoke Spanish to some, but mostly we made hand signals, and various things our big gangly group did made the kids laugh, which made us laugh. The kids all hung very closely to each other, some carried their baby sister or brother

tucked comfortably inside large pieces of cloth, hanging from their shoulders. In the later hours of the days, boys appeared and played soccer together.

One of the nights we gathered with people from the village, to play some songs, hear some of their music, talk and so on. We were led to the gathering place by a Zapatista soldier on a horse. From every corner people appeared, walking down the path to the gathering place, almost by magic... There had been no announcements. It's hard to explain. Things are unspoken there. The power

within the community is an intangible thing, although you can see it in the eyes of the commandantes, the rest of their faces hidden by black masks.

We performers, Zapatistas, and some members of the village gathered on the stage, overlooking the men, women and children below. The women wore dresses in beautiful, vibrant colors. Luis did theater, people spoke in Spanish over the mic, Amy, Michelle Malone and I played a few songs and Sara Lee held the extra mic for us. Then the local band played. Women moved to the back of the field. They wait to be asked to dance. Some of us began to play with the children by the front of the stage, until there was nothing but a whirling dervish of running, spinning, shrieking kids and a few visitors from another country. Meanwhile, in the back, men and women began to move in the shadows, dancing. Cecilia told me that they dance for hours during these gatherings. The evening was beautiful, like everything else, too much to fully absorb. There's so much to tell! As I think back now, memories flood me, but I don't possess the language to respectfully recount them.



Zapatista men and women



Lori Porior dialogues with Comandante Tacho. Cecilia Rodriguez translates.

Commandante Tacho spoke with us, telling us about the struggle. About how people had very little land to farm, all of it rugged. They could not afford tractors, they received no help from the government, people were dying of disease, everything transported on foot or by horses so that the people worked and worked and worked and barely survived and often didn't. Systematic oppression of the peoples who had first inhabited the land. Ingrained racism. A terrible struggle over a long period of time for people who wanted no more than to farm the land and live in their communities, continue a respectful way of life. To live fully.

The indigenous peoples of Mexico have suffered a long time, and the Zapatista movement exists to free them from an often brutal way of life. In the midst of this struggle, the people carry on with spirit that cannot be described. They meet when they can to dance. The songs echo through the village. The Zapatista way is a way for both men and women to live with equal dignity and respect.

I don't know, the more I talk about it, the more I swim in it. We came as visitors to listen and to learn and to absorb and observe, and if you go there to visit, you will not return the same. You will see the Mexican army parade through the middle of the town with their obscene tanks and machine guns and menacing cameras. You will see villagers gather to watch them pass. You will see the faces of children you will never forget, even if you take home no pictures, you will meet members of the Zapatista army so kind, gentle, patient and generous that it seems strange they should have to strap a gun across their shoulders. You will hear the melodies of songs that stir unnamed places inside and women who dance even though they have spent all day hauling wood across their backs for miles.



Fact finding

You will taste a way of life profoundly nourishing and from your tongue may spring a song or poem or sentence or word or maybe nothing but silence. Silence only the heart can turn to song.

Emily Saliers

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