

A Taco Testimony

*Meditations on Family,
Food and Culture*



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You'll just know. Something in your body will start twitching and itching and you'll know, you'll just know it's ready. If for some reason you don't start twitching, it should take about 20 minutes. That is, if you use simple white rice and not brown rice. If you use brown rice, we know what kind of person you are, and it will take longer, about 45 minutes.

Take the rice from the heat and let it rest. If you are my Mother, your rice will be perfect. If you are like me, the rice will be pretty good, my husband's phrase for so-so or merely acceptable. His arbitrary "so-so" is what I fear my rice tastes like.

CONSEJO

The trick with rice really has to do with the process of sautéing the onion with the rice, browning the kernels a bit, and then gently adding in the tomato and spices, stirring the mixture with love and then leaving it alone. All my life I've fussed with rice. I don't know how to leave anything alone, especially food. Cooking Mexican food has taught me when to persist, when to let go; it has shown me which side goes in and which side goes out; and even more, it has given me the grace to know what is all right and what is better. I've learned from the best and finally I've allowed myself to step back and leave alone. Cooking comida Mexicana can teach even the hard-core impatient a benign patience.

Mexican—Not Spanish—Rice

Mexicans can never make Spanish rice; they can only make Mexican rice. Mexicans can make arroz al estilo Español but really what they make best is their own rice. Many people won't admit to being Mexican. They consider themselves Spanish. What can I say? This has led to a confusion of rice among other things. As for me, I consider myself a Mexicana/Mexican American/Chicana. So what kind of rice do I make? Let's not get lost in semantics or nationalism. And yet, let us celebrate who

we really are. The questions and answers that lead to the discovery of self are to be found in one's true Culture.

We were all Mexicans on my Mother's side of my family. My Father had illusions of grandeur like many people from that time and place. They were this way because they had been beaten and worn down by poverty and racism, by tremendous lack and its opposite, grasping. They wanted more and got less, and never had enough money to hold on to the land they once owned, out in the hills of Doña Ana. They were people whose shame shamed them, but they couldn't articulate their anger. And as a result, they felt inferior. And as a result of their sense of inferiority, they became deracinated. It isn't easy for me to speak about this. I didn't know my ancestors' deprivation, their hunger or their want. All I know is that in searching for their American dream they forgot who they were. And in the forgetting, they moved away from language and culture.

I once asked my Father what his ethnicity was. He told me without hesitation that he was a "Spanish white man." My Mother, along with the rest of us, alas, was Mexican. And even worse than being a Mexican, my Mother was a Texan. I don't think my Father ever forgave her for her overweening sense of pride in being from over there, that other place, Texas.

This, then, was the great tragedy of my parents' lives, the fact that they were divorced not only in spirit, but in culture and core ethnicity. My Father would never admit to being a Mexican married to a Mexican.

The distinction between Spanish and Mexican is a sore point in our broken, unspoken-about New Mexico that few care to think about, with its racism and divisions between Spanish and Mexican. Northern New Mexicans consider themselves Spanish, while many of us who live in the south consider ourselves Mexican. There are always those who want nothing to do with the country of most of our ancestors. There exists an invisible membrane of denial for so many. The Spanish look down on the Mexicans, who sometimes look down on the Native American *nativos*. Many who have Mexican *raíces*/roots sometimes believe they are lesser than others—the

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way anyone who has been treated badly is made to feel lesser. And when you think you are nothing, you oppress others, whether it is other people, other cultures or your own family.

I have always been happy to say that my roots are from México. And in that pride comes an open honesty about who I am.

One of the least prejudiced people I've ever known was my Mother. And one of the most prejudiced was my Father. The only person who was more prejudiced than my Father was his mother, Lupe Triviz Chávez. Granma Lupe. Where she got this hatred of the Other, I will never know. I can only attribute this lack of compassion and acceptance to their hard lives, to the time in which they grew up and their reaction to their own displacement and mistreatment by Others.

My Mother often took Granma Lupe to the Fiesta Drive-In to see movies. She rued the day she took her to see the movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* with Sidney Poitier, who played the role of the fiancé of a beautiful white woman. "¿Pero cómo?" my Grandmother huffed. "Ay, ¿pero cómo? ¡No es posible!" Granma never recovered from this sacrilege of a movie with its impossible scenario.

My Father's family was afraid of black and Chinese people and anyone who wasn't a Spanish white person. My Mother and her people were respectful to Anglos; they spoke to them and about them in hushed tones, and with deference. They counted many Anglos as friends, something my Father's people did as well. If the Chávez could have, I think they would have chosen to be Anglo. And because of this estrangement from culture, I could never get a handle on who they imagined they were. I try to understand, but I don't. Both families were punished for speaking Spanish in the schoolyard. How is it that my Mother's family was even poorer than my Father's, more beset upon, and yet rose above their circumstances to embrace difference while my Father's family didn't? How is it that one family lost its culture and the other retained it?

As a result of who I am, where I live and how I have been taught to see and experience the world, I have continued my never-ending inquiry into the meaning and nature of Culture.

What is Culture? Synonyms for the word culture include: cultivation, refinement, taste, aestheticism, civilization, delicacy, breeding, schooling and grounding. We are taught to be cultured: well-bred, learned, educated, erudite, scholarly and tasteful. We are given tools to be a cultured person: we learn to read, to appreciate contemporary arts, to value history and to go to museums, the opera, ballet and the theatre. But Culture is more than a philosophy or diversion of the mind, it is an openness to experience, a willingness to accept the spirit and life of the Other through action and acceptance.

But still we are uncultured, and we continue to kill. And we continue to denigrate and shame others, to diminish their dreams, to refuse them rights we have ourselves. We look down on others who are less fortunate, less able to maintain the imagined life our greed dictates to us. We believe in holding them back, keeping them down, trapping them behind fences or putting them behind bars—or worse, we offer them little hope for achieving what for us is normal, expected.

I live very close to the U.S./México border, but you would think I lived on the moon. Many people here are afraid of Culture, afraid of what it means: having to meet other nationalities, most especially Mexicans and Native people, as equals.

How can someone who has lived here all his or her life not know at least a little Spanish or understand relevant cultural icons or tenets of belief? How long should it take for someone to take an interest in their environment and begin to understand the very basic realities of one's home place? There are those who readily embrace a Culture and those who keep themselves apart. How do we learn this separation? Who teaches us? Is it our parents, our family, our teachers, our friends?

I find myself saying over and over again, "It's a lack of Culture. People don't have Culture. They don't want to understand the Culture." But it's more than my simplistic pronouncements. All our life we are learning Culture and how to embrace life of all kinds and at all levels.

I was criticized for dressing my elderly Father in guayaberas, the loose and comfortable men's shirts. "He looks too Mexican," a relative complained. My response to that was that he *was* a Mexican! And for anyone's information, the guayabera is actually a Panamanian shirt. The same relative berated my clothes, festive blouses and long colorful skirts. "You look like a Mexican! Can't you wear anything else?" My retort was, "I *am* a Mexican." I was also criticized for having a huge nopal growing in my front yard—"too Mexican," I suppose. How can anyone criticize a cactus? The Franklin Mountains have been called ugly by a journalist in our local newspaper. How can mountains be ugly? A local art teacher didn't know what a milagro was when I presented a cousin with one. We live so close to México and yet our Mother Culture says little to this woman. A man who lives here but is not from here is trying to sue to get the three crosses, the symbol of our town, removed from all public displays. Recently someone has informed me that when she comes into our Cultural Center, the colors hurt her. Where are the pastels, she asks? I wonder if the oscillating Our Lady of Guadalupe red and blue night-lights haven't gotten to her? They are so Mexican, so Southwestern, so New Mexican, a part of who we are as a people on the frontera. We are a people of color and music and life, and for that we should have no apologies.

So, where is the understanding of Culture? I keep asking myself.

In my travels, wherever I go I find people of all ages who are hungry for Culture. They want to know who their grandparents are, where they came from and to whom they belong. Everyone wants the energy of being and belonging.

In Oklahoma a young adopted Chicana mourns the fact that her adoptive parents won't let her date Latinos. An older woman tells me her grandfather is part Cherokee, but he never talks about it. A high school student informs me that her

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father is a minister but she can never write because he will never approve of what she writes. A distressed college student admits that her boyfriend doesn't like her writing and that he rewrites all her stories for her.

My advice is cold, hard and honest: Soon you will be on your own and you can date whomever you choose. Don't lose your roots. Help your grandfather to accept who he is and if he doesn't, learn about your people on your own. Don't show your father your writing. Keep your writing to yourself; it's like a fetus that needs to be nourished. I just have one thing to say to you: Please, don't let anyone take away your soul. You know who you are, so hang on and get on with it!

People want to know their roots, who they belong to and where they come from. We are all connected to someone, to something, and to know the genesis of who we are is a great blessing. It will be our rock and solace in the hard times, don't you forget it. As Cultural warriors, our greatest task is to allow others to explore their creativity without fear of censure or reproach. The greatest gift we can give each other is our lack of fear. The blessing we give each other is our tolerance, our undivided attention and our acceptance of who we are. We need to respect each other. When looked at closely, the great walls dividing us as humans are really very inconsequential. I really believe this is true.

We need to approach Culture with a tender and loving heart. It is easy to be judgmental or unkind to those who are judgmental and unkind to others. We must continue to instruct, educate, heal and empower others, who in turn will do the same.

True Culture does not divide us—instead it brings us together to explore the great mysteries that life presents us. The sometimes-difficult mysteries reveal to us our great and always present interconnection. We are all one, if only we can see this fact through the veil of perceived difference.

We have so much to be thankful for: Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, tacos of all kinds, Pad Thai, sushi, chicken chow mein, pizza, meat loaf and mashed potatoes, mariachis, symphony orchestras, rock and roll, rap, funk, rhythm and blues,

rancheras, boleros, soul music, day, night, rain, snow, blue skies, clouds, our mothers, our fathers, the many ancestors whose blood and pulse of life we carry within us.

How can I separate you from me and me from you? And if I could, would I? And why would I, knowing that completion comes from within the self because of the many selves?

Promise me, dear reader, you will begin to look at Culture in a different way. Look at and then explore your small part of this great vast world without fear and insecurity. It will reveal to you great joy, great mercy, great forgiveness and great hope.

¡Missss Rede!

"Stop that noise. Stop that and listen to me. You have no right to do that. To go off. When will you be back?

"Did I ever tell you about my honeymoon in El Paso? No, not to your Father. To Bucho Faver. Your sister's father. He was accidentally poisoned.

"Every day we went to a little restaurant. On Mesa Street. Every day we ate oysters. I didn't like them at first. But Bucho did. We were happy, Bucho and I. He was a kind man, shy. And he was very clean. He would bathe two and three times a day.

"It all started when I told my cousin Toña that I was going to marry Bucho Faver and she told someone and someone told Bucho. Delfina Rede says she's going to marry you. Shafter, Texas, was a small town and I was a teacher there. But I was more than a teacher.

"One night I was called to deliver a child. The partera was gone. As the teacher, I was expected to know, to serve, to do. I knew nothing about babies, but I boiled the water and brought that child into the world, his bright body slithering, the umbilical cord cut with a knife. He lived! He lived to grow and thank me, Miss Rede!

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