

HOMAGE TO ANTHROPOLOGY:

REFLECTIONS ON A VISIT TO MEXICO'S MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGIA

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After 36 years of teaching, I decided to celebrate my retirement by visiting the Museo Nacional de Antropologia in Mexico City. Even though my more recent research has focused on Southeast Asia, I wanted to go back to the place where my cross-cultural experience began. I had never even heard the word anthropology before enrolling at Georgia State University in 1966, but I took a course on American Indians, to understand that part of my family history that was indigenous, and after that I was hooked. When I graduated with a double-major in history and anthropology in 1970, I realized my great lacking was my experience in actually living in a different culture. Travel abroad was now my top priority.

From the moment I arrived at the Laredo border crossing, everything changed. I had taken Spanish in high school, but I had never even left the South, or visited other parts of the U.S., before this. Crossing into another country, where a different language was the norm and people looked and acted so differently from anything I had ever seen, was a mind-boggling experience. I loved it. For the first time, I felt I understood what the immigrants felt as they first came to the United States.

Seeing the pyramids of Teotihuacan, Tula, Chichen Itza, and Uxmal on that initial trip were just incredible. But it was the Museo Nacional de Antropologia that so affected me. It was the first great museum I had ever visited, and my return trip now, after 41 years, and all the many great museums I have visited around the world, confirms my initial reaction that is the best museum in the world. What is also gratifying on my return trip is to see the incorporation of

visual anthropology into the exhibits, and the honor I feel to have been part of a department which has made so many contributions to the development of this new field.

The same things that so impressed me on my initial visit impressed me again this time. I was particularly struck with the number of exhibits that ended with words like these: "After existing as a political entity for seven centuries this culture collapsed in a violent era of internal conflict." Though many examples of conquest exist, it seems the most common way that societies fall apart are due to internal differences. We are a fractious species. As I look at the level of opposition within American politics today, the vitriolic hatreds and greater interest in attacking others than in cooperation, I despair that we might even reach our third century. When one fourth of all prisoners in the world are being held in U.S. jails, when we are more concerned about security than about liberty, and Americans are enveloped in a race for material goods which the environment can no longer sustain, we have already lost the precious heritage that allowed our rise to prominence. And so, in the museums of the future, the United States will be seen as a short blip of time, an experiment of democracy that collapsed because of its own divisions within itself.

After that trip, I wanted to travel everywhere. And I did. The experiences of my life flash back before my eyes: attending my first pow wow at Anadarko, Oklahoma, studying gamelan at the palace of Sultan Hamengkubuwono in Yogyakarta, getting thrown off a camel in the Egyptian desert, exiting a hogan in the Navajo Nation each morning with a scattering corn pollen in the four directions to give thanks for the coming day, trekking during a soaking rain to an ancient shrine on the island of Raratonga, being grabbed to perform at a Reyog Ponorogo dance practice in Central Java, living in a Buddhist monastery in Thailand and participating in the most spectacular funeral service I have ever seen (complete with fireworks) celebrating the

accomplished life of a prominent Buddhist monk. swimming in a candle-lit underground cavern with some Maya friends, sitting in quiet contemplation at the temples of Borobudor and Angkor Wat, and being put through my own vision quest under the direction of a contrary medicine person at Pine Ridge.

As I write this, other instances spring to mind, leading me to recognize that the truly greatest gifts of life are our experiences. So many people expend so much effort to accumulate material goods, which can be lost in an instant. We don't really own anything, except our memories. Far surpassing the value of material goods, a wealth of experience is the real goal of life. As long as we can remember, no one can take them from us.

I feel so blessed that my life has been such an adventure, and which is due in great measure to anthropology. It is responsible for raising my awareness and changing my perspectives in so many ways. It allowed me to escape from the confines of the culture in which I was raised. People who can do that in life are fundamentally different from those who have lived their life entirely within their own natal culture. Anthropology, and the experience of living in other cultures, has been one of the major gifts of my life.