

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

In Search of Connection

Karen · Wednesday, November 13th, 2019

My Mexican artist friend returned from New York City with a dejected look on her face. Connection was so difficult there, she bemoaned. Tales of people glued to their phones followed, and then her idea for an art exhibition that would examine the idea of connection/disconnection in the age of technology. I could relate 100% to what she shared. Large cities in the U.S. can be very lonely places. They give the appearance of connection, what with the millions of people that inhabit them and swarm their streets. But actual face-to-face time gets easily usurped by people's technology addictions and the ubiquitous option to check-out.

Although technology and its disconnecting effects are everywhere, I find they are buffered here in Mexico, simply because Mexican culture places an extremely high value on face-to face connection. As is true in most Latin American countries, relationships are the primary currency for everything. Actual in-person, daily interactions are how things get accomplished, in a nuanced, extensive network that exists outside of most technology channels. I can't tell you the number of resources I've learned about that only came by word of mouth, and when I later searched online for the business, class, person, or opportunity, it was nowhere to be found.

Of course, this kind of relational currency is much more time-consuming than surface online exchanges. It requires showing up somewhere, making an effort to really talk to people, and being much more present to your surroundings. As a result, getting anywhere in Mexico takes time. A simple walk to run errands isn't just a walk to run errands. I'll pass my neighbor who I must stop to chat with (giving only a quick hello is considered rude). Then a few blocks later I might run into a friend or acquaintance. At the tienda, I know the shopkeeper and take time to exchange pleasantries. And along the way, countless people greet one another with "buenos días" or "buenas tardes." Getting from point A to point B in Mexico is never a straight line. It is a curving path, and time must be allowed for the relational detours that arise.

But traveling this way is far more rewarding. You begin to see people in entirely new ways and gain the riches of true human connection on a much deeper level. It does not surprise me that people in Mexico, both expats and Mexicans alike, seem happier and more content than their U.S. counterparts. We're relational beings, and when real life relationships get crowded out by a fixation with our screens, people's spirits suffer. We lose something profound when technology takes the place of living.

I recently finished a book called *Why We Left: An Anthology of American Women Expats*. One woman tells the story of being at a dinner party in Portland shortly before moving to Mexico. A

friend's comment that she must be moving to "disconnect" gave her pause, and as she reflected, she realized it was exactly the opposite. "No," she replied to her friend, "I am going to connect."

In the quest for true intimacy, we must take a simple honest look at how much our devices rob us of what is real. We can learn something from the relational richness that permeates Latin American cultures. And with minimal effort, we can return to prioritizing who and what is in front of us and watch life grow fuller as a result.

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